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Deciding to wait: Exploring the lived experiences and relationship processes among African American couples who remained sexually abstinent until marriage

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Deciding to wait: Exploring the lived experiences and relationship processes among African American couples who remained sexually abstinent until marriage

by

Emily Nanci McKnight

A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Major: Human Development and Family Studies

Program of Study Committee:

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The student author, whose presentation of the scholarship herein was approved by the program of study committee, is solely responsible for the content of this dissertation. The Graduate College will ensure this dissertation is globally accessible and will not permit alterations after a degree is conferred.

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2020

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DEDICATION

Devin

Ever since we met at the age of 15, you've been a great friend and a man of your word. You spoke with confidence and clarity, well beyond your years. At 19, you declared that you'd help me raise Emani and obtain my Ph.D. We broke up later that year, with low funds and long distance taking the win. At 32, you told me that I had never been loved by a godly man and if I would give you the opportunity that I wouldn't regret it. You were right.

I dedicate this dissertation to you. You have not only supported me through this degree, as you said you would, but helped raise not one but four of our children. You ushered Emani through undergrad and towards a career and life of her own. You guided Kennedy through her teen-girl moments, sports (never missing a game), and on to becoming an exceptional student. Devin Lawson, fostering his brilliant mind, and Eden Joy, our "Iowa Ph.D. baby," channeling her adventurous spirit. You lost one parent and helped the other beat cancer; yet while I read, wrote, presented, and cried, you somehow kept this family afloat. Four years, three states, and a pandemic later, you have been the rock that got us through. You came back to me and fulfilled everything you've ever said. May God reward you for your faithfulness.

Randie

My friend, my office-mate at ISU, I would have never imagined writing this. You were a voice of reason, made over-sharing a thing-to-do, and exhibited true sisterhood. I thank God for pairing us in 79 LeBaron. For every woman of color who resides in that office hereafter, this, too, is for you.

"We got this" - Randie D. Camp (1983 – 2020)

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Finally, I salute the ten couples who participated in this study, whose voices are now the hallmark of the experience of sexual abstinence until marriage. I am honored to share their stories in the hope that they will never be forgotten. May their love continue to inspire, forever.

ABSTRACT

Patterns of marriage in the United States have changed in recent decades. Many scholars have attributed this change to the acceptance and prevalence of beliefs and practices that previously were positioned under the context of marriage, but today are occurring outside of marriage, specifically, the acceptance of premarital sex once viewed as deviant behavior which is now socially normative. Yet, scholars have found that sexual abstinence is linked to informed decision-making, healthier relationships, and higher quality and stable marriages. However, these scholars have utilized nationally representative samples and conducted analyses that illuminate associations, not process or meaning. Therefore, we still know very little about the lived experiences of people who remain sexually abstinent until marriage. Another gap in the scholarly literature on sexual abstinence concerns the inclusion of African American samples. It is important to understand how sexual abstinence occurs within this population. Thus, the aim of this study is to explore the lived experiences and relationship processes among ten African American couples ($N=20$) who remained sexually abstinent for at least six months prior to marriage.

In the current study, I utilized phenomenology and conducted in-depth interviews to explore the couples' lived experiences. I found seven major themes: Motivations to Abstain, Challenges while Abstaining, Sexual Decision-making, Spiritual Connections in Partner Selection, Allowable Sexual Behaviors and Boundaries, and Connections among Sexual Abstinence and Relationships as well as Marriage. Implications for future research, practice and policy are discussed.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter begins with an overview of the context and background that frames this study. Following is the problem statement, the statement of purpose, and accompanying research questions. Also included in this chapter are discussion about the research approach, my perspective as the researcher and related assumptions. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the proposed rationale and significance of this research study and definitions of key terminology used.

Background and Context

Patterns of marriage in the United States have changed in recent decades, as reflected by trends towards older ages at first marriage, lower marriage rates, and a greater prevalence of female-headed households (Chambers & Kravitz, 2011; Cherlin, 2020; Pinderhughes, 2002; Wilcox et al., 2015). Many scholars have attributed this change to the acceptance and prevalence of beliefs and practices that previously were limited to marriage, but today occur outside of marriage. The increase in cohabitation has influenced marital trends. The number of Americans who are currently cohabiting is less than those who are married. The percentage of adults ages 18 to 44 who have ever lived with an unmarried partner (59%), however, has surpassed the share who have ever been married (50%), according to an analysis of the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG). Additionally, the acceptance of premarital sex has increased in the United States; few people (17% to 24%) feel that premarital sex is wrong and most Americans (82% to 95%) have had premarital intercourse (Renfrow & Bruce, 2014; Smith et al., 2018). Cohabitation and premarital sex have undergone a transformational shift and have become statistically normative (Cherlin, 2020). Scholars further note that although adults

commonly engage in premarital sex, cohabit with partners, and often even have children before marriage, most Americans make a slow but steady transition to marriage (Cherlin, 2020; Manning et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2018).

The widest gap in marriage rates is among African Americans. As of 2019, 29% of African Americans were presently married, compared to 51% of Whites, 58% of Asians, and 43% of Hispanics. About five out of every ten African American men and women have never been married, which is the highest proportion of any racial category (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.-c). As marriage rates have declined, the age at first marriage has also increased. In 2017, the average age at first marriage hovered at age 29 for all racial groups except for African Americans, which was at a high of age 32 (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.-a). Although intimate partnerships continue to exist among African American couples, research suggests that family life appears different in African American households. For instance, of African American births in 2016, 70% of these births were to unmarried women, as compared to 29% to non-Hispanic White women (Martin et al., 2019), with an increased likelihood of these children being born to unpartnered, non-cohabiting, mothers (Daniels et al. 2017; Manning, 2015). This finding is supported by the 2019 American Community Survey reporting that 57% of African American households with children under the age of 18 are headed by single, unpartnered parents, compared to 25% of non-Hispanic Whites (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.-b). Given the marital trends of African Americans, specifically children born to unwed parents and the prevalence of single parent households, it is said that “the weakening of marriage in the field of intimate partnerships has [also] been transformational for this group, and in this sense, marriage has been deinstitutionalized for African Americans” (Cherlin, 2020, p.70).

Consequently, scholars and policy makers have made strides in understanding the mechanisms that have contributed to the decline in marriage among African Americans, considering the benefits that marriage affords to individuals, children and families (Blackman et al., 2005; Chambers & Kravitz, 2011; Chaney & Monroe, 2011; Green et al., 2012; Knopp et al., 2017; Malone-Colon, 2007; Marks et al., 2008). The extant literature has evolved from deficiency models crediting African Americans' inability to form stable marriages to structural components that hinder stable marriages from forming. Scholars have also attended to psychological and interpersonal factors such as marital attitudes, values, and beliefs as well as the perceived attainability of marriage and how models or messages about marriage influence the marital trends of African Americans (Blackman et al., 2005; Edin & Reed, 2005; Fossett & Kiecolt, 1993; James et al., 1996; Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995). Other initiatives highlight the facilitators and characteristics of Black marriages, noting religion as a protective factor (Beach et al., 2011; Chaney et al., 2016; Fincham et al., 2011; Hurt, 2014; Marks et al., 2008).

Problem Statement

Scholars have found that sexual abstinence (SA) is linked to informed decision-making, healthier relationships, and higher quality and stable marriages, with early works serving as foundational literature to this line of research (Burgess & Wallin, 1953; Janus & Janus, 1993; Kelly & Conley, 1987; Newcomb & Bentler, 1981; Peplau et al., 1977; Tavis & Sadd, 1977). Later research builds upon this work (Busby et al., 2010; Finger et al., 2004; Janus & Janus, 1993; Kahn & London, 1991; Laumann et al., 2000; Oldham, 2019; Stanley and Rhoades, 2009; Stanley, Rhoades, et al., 2006; Teachman, 2004; Willoughby et al., 2014). This body of literature has historically focused on individuals and couples who never had sex prior to marriage, with

recent studies finding similar marital effects when controlling for samples with a sexual history. Collectively, these works are dated, sporadic, and have often utilized survey data, and did not go into depth on the participants' experiences. Therefore, we still know very little about the lived experiences of people who engage in this courtship behavior. Further, scholars have not employed samples of African Americans in their studies. Therefore, little is known about the lived experiences and relationship processes among this understudied group.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the lived experiences and relationship processes of a sample of African American couples who abstained from sex until marriage for at least six months prior to marriage. Utilizing a phenomenological approach, I conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with ten African American married couples who abstained from sex for at least six months prior to marriage. Using thick descriptions to describe the lived experiences of these couples will fill a critical gap in the research literature. One primary research question is addressed, along with related sub-questions:

Research Questions and Anticipated Hypothesized Relationships

The study addressed the following primary research question:

What are the lived experiences of African American couples who abstained from sex until marriage for at least six months prior to marriage?

The following subsequent questions were explored in support of the main question:

(a) What were the motivating factors in the participants' decisions to abstain from sex until marriage? I anticipated that religiosity, prior relationship history, desire for marriage and belief in the institution of marriage would be motivating factors in the participants' decisions to

abstain from sex (Bradley et al. 2013; Eisenberg et al., 2009; Rasberry & Goodson, 2009; Rhoades et al., 2011).

(b) What constitutes SA in terms of sexual history and permissible sexual behaviors? In review of the current literature on SA and premarital sex, scholars have reported mixed findings on whether SA is defined as refraining from penile-vaginal sex or if it includes other sexual behaviors (e.g. oral, self, mutual masturbation). One of the aims of this study was to define SA and understand the meanings attributed to different intimate behaviors.

(c) What were the perceived costs and benefits of abstaining from sex until marriage? Abstaining from premarital sex has been also associated with informed-decision making, healthier relationships, and greater relationship and marital satisfaction (Busby et al., 2010; Rhoades & Stanley, 2014; Stanley & Rhoades, 2009; Teachman, 2004; Willoughby et al., 2014). I expected that one's relationship history may have shaped their expectations about the perceived costs and benefits of abstaining from sex until marriage. Therefore, I expected a linkage between previous romantic history and perceived costs and benefits of SA, especially among participants who reported a romantic or sexual history with someone other than their spouse.

Research Approach

As I examined this unexplored phenomenon among African Americans, utilizing phenomenology. The purpose of phenomenology is to investigate the meaning of the lived experiences of people and identify the essence of human experience or phenomena (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016; Moustakas, 1994; Saldaña, 2011). This tradition and approach influenced my interview questions as well as the analytical approach. I sought to conduct semi-

structured interviews with 10 married couples (20 adults) who abstained from sex for at least six months prior to marriage. The eligibility criteria for participation was for both spouses to identify as African American, be currently married, and live together. Both partners must have abstained from sex until marriage for six months or longer prior to marriage.

Researcher Assumptions

Five assumptions were relevant in the current study. First, finding a suitable partner and marrying were goals for unmarried African Americans (Chaney & Monroe, 2011, Chaney & Fairfax, 2013). Second, few African American couples served as models of how to attract, date and decide if a partner was suitable for marriage. Scholars have reported that lower quality relationships and declining marital rates lead to divorce (Blackman et al., 2005; Bryant et al., 2010; Edin & Reed, 2005; Fossett & Kiecolt, 1993; James et al., 1996; Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995). A lack of positive images of marriage was expressed in narratives among married Black men (Hurt et al., 2017).

Third, satisfying long-term marriages were positive experiences for individuals, couples and families. Researchers found benefits of satisfying marriages for finances, emotional health, and physical health among African American families (Blackman et al., 2005; Dixon, 2009). Fourth, SA until marriage was not a societal norm, especially among African Americans. Few people felt that premarital sex was wrong and that most Americans had experienced premarital intercourse (Renfrow & Bruce, 2014; Smith et al., 2018).

Finally, adults and scholars have not clearly defined SA. There is an absence of clarity about allowable behaviors and choosing abstinence after having a sexual history. Perhaps this was due to the lack of available research, education, and theory on this phenomenon. What

little was available often contained conflicting and confusing terminology (Bersamin et al., 2005; Landor & Simons, 2014; Shepherd et al., 2017). Yet, scholars reported significant positive correlates with relationship satisfaction and marital quality for those who abstained from sex until marriage (Busby et al., 2010; Teachman, 2004; Willoughby et al., 2014). Therefore, there was value in gaining clarity about how SA is defined.

Rationale and Significance

The change in marital trends (i.e., lower marriage rates, increased ages at first marriage) indicate that there has been a “radical restructuring”, and that the practices and beliefs surrounding the institution of marriage has changed greatly (Cherlin, 2020, p. 66). Stated simply, the acceptance and practices of alternatives to marriage, specifically, cohabitation and premarital sex, have undergone transformational change, given that these two behaviors are no longer limited to marriage (Cherlin, 2020). According to scholars, most move on to marriage despite this transformational change (Cherlin, 2020; Musick & Michelmore, 2018). However, this trajectory from cohabitation to marriage does not follow the same trajectory for African Americans.

Scholars have report that African Americans have a lower likelihood to transition to marriage, higher number of sexual partners, involvement in more short-term romantic relationships, lower quality relationships, and a lower likelihood to progress to cohabitation or marriage, when compared to their White counterparts (Daniels, 2017; Sassler, 2012; Olmstead et al., 2013; Teachman, 2004). The weakening of the prominence of marriage has been a transformational for African Americans, (e.g., children born to unpartnered parents, single

parent households), therefore adults have chosen to engage in other intimate unions outside of marriage or remain single. This trend is called deinstitutionalization (Cherlin, 2020).

Furthermore, for the purposes of this study, using exclusively an African American sample is significant for advancing the scholarly literature. Given the embryonic state of the current literature on SA until marriage, more empirical effort is needed before we can fully operationalize SA and explore the lived experiences and relationship processes of those who practice this courtship behavior. Additionally, examining what constitutes SA, in terms of inclusive and exclusive sexual behaviors will aid in establishing and disseminating a clear and concise definition of SA and aid in conceptualization and measurement of these behaviors. Clarity in the operationalization of SA will help inform research, education, policy, and practice.

Therefore, I propose the following to address the gaps in the SA literature: (1) seek, identify, and understand the lived experiences and the underlying relationship processes of married couples who abstained from sex for at least six months prior to marriage, and (2) explore the heterogeneity among abstaining couples, among African Americans, an under-represented group in the literature on this topic.

Definitions of Key Terminology

The following terms and their definitions are used throughout this dissertation. In an effort to increase understanding, these terms are presented in topical order and are as follows:

Sexual Behavior Terms

Premarital sex is sexual intercourse within a romantic relationship that leads to marriage. This definition emphasizes both the timing of the first sexual intercourse (i.e., before marriage) and with whom one engages in sex (i.e., a future spouse). Today, premarital sex

refers to penile-vaginal intercourse in which an individual engages—often within a series of monogamous relationships—before a couple marries (Renfrow & Bruce, 2014).

Secondary abstinence is the practice of abstaining from sex after sexual debut or being sexually-experienced. This often occurs after a period of sexual activity (Loewenson et al., 2004).

Sexual abstinence (SA) involves refraining from specific behaviors that persons consider to be sex. Confusion arises because people have different views about what constitutes sex. Few would argue that sex excludes penetrative sex. There is less agreement about whether oral sex, anal sex, petting, and kissing is considered as sexual behavior (Miller, 2017; Russell, 2017).

Sexual behavior includes, but is not limited to, kissing, sexual touching, oral sex, penetrative sex (penile-vaginal and anal), and masturbation (touching of one's own genitals for pleasure) (Waterman & Lefkowitz, 2018).

Relational Terms

Courtship, according to Ogolsky & Cate (2009),

Can best be defined by its overall objective and the behaviors that characterize this period in human relationships. Traditionally, the objective of courtship is to develop a relationship that leads to marriage. Courtship behaviors include dating and other activities that provide couples with information that can lead to a long-term commitment. Some note that it is important to understand courtship because the nature and quality of courtship can influence marital satisfaction and other committed unions. (p. 356)

Relationship processes are changes or behaviors in a romantic relationship that mediate or lead toward a particular result or outcome (Pietromonaco et al. 2013). Another scholar defined relationship processes as having four components: expectations, perceptions, interactions, and awareness. Relationship processes influence one's perceptions and shape one's expectations and interactions. When interactions meet expectations in the relationship, the interactions confirm and strengthen an individual's perceptions (Young & Kleist, 2010). Scholars have documented factors that may influence relationship processes: commitment, trust, friendship, and intimacy.

Inconsistencies in terminology and definitions used by scholars exist across studies, textbooks and other reference materials (Bersamin et al., 2005; Landor & Simons, 2014; Shepherd et al., 2017). In an effort to avoid confusion, the next section provides a definition of these terms, followed by the rationale on why these terms will not be used in this dissertation.

Alternative Terms for SA

Celibacy has been defined as "abstinence from marriage and sexual relations. Most common in religion, celibacy is the gateway to sacred roles in Buddhism and Roman Catholicism. In a religious context, a person embracing celibacy often takes a vow" (Aune 2009, p. 118). Since this study speaks to those who have abstained from sex until marriage, with a goal to understand lived experiences and relationship processes, *SA until marriage* will be used, instead of the term *celibacy*.

Purity is "freedom from added elements or contaminants, the absence or degree of absence of anything harmful, inferior, unwanted or of a different kind" (Bolaffi et al., 2003, p. 233). Purity is in principle a religious concept and is the state of being ritually acceptable. For

example, in Christianity *purity* often refers to abstinence from sexual contact (Bolaffi et al., 2003). Scholars report non-religious reasons for SA (Bradley et al., 2013; Loewenson et al., 2004; Rasberry and Goodson, 2009). Given these considerations, the term *purity* will not be utilized.

Chastity is defined as the “beliefs about the importance of waiting until marriage to have sex, and the importance of sex within marriage as a bonding experience” (Hardy & Willoughby, 2017, p. 285). In this context, chastity is described as a moral value, instead of a practiced behavior, and for this reason, the term *chastity* will not be used.

Asexual is defined as “not experiencing sexual attraction.” There are some people, however, who define themselves as asexual and do experience sexual attraction, but who do not wish to act upon it for a variety of reasons, and may sometimes therefore be referred to as *celibate* (Richards & Barker, 2013). This phenomenon was viewed as restraining from sexual behavior, implying a lack of desire (Richards & Barker, 2013). I am not focused on those who do not experience sexual attraction. I will not utilize the term *asexual*.

Secondary virginity is defined as a sexually-experienced person’s decision to refrain from intimate encounters for a set period of time and refers to that decision as a kind of virginity, rather than “mere” abstinence (Carpenter, 2011, p. 115). Due to the ambiguity in “set period of time,” secondary virginity will not be used throughout this dissertation. For this investigation, the universal term of sexual abstinence (SA), and at times specifying SA until marriage, was utilized.

Chapter Summary

The primary aim of this dissertation is to seek, identify, and understand the lived experiences and the underlying relationship processes of African American married couples who abstained from sex until marriage for at least six months. Chapter 2 outlines the relevant literature on both African American marriage and SA and discusses how this understudied phenomenon is significant for further study.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

This literature review begins with an in-depth summary of marital trends in the United States and the state of Black marriage. I also discuss current initiatives that focus on identifying factors that lead to marriages among African American couples. Other areas of research also outlined include SA and its influence on adults, relationships and marriage. I also introduce “sliding versus deciding,” a conceptual framework that guides this study.

Demographic Marital Trends

Over the past several decades in the U.S., marital trends have changed. The age of marriage has risen, divorce rates have stabilized, cohabitation has increased, and non-marital births are more prevalent (Hawkins et al., 2013; Pinderhughes, 2002; Stanley, Rhoades, Amato et al., 2010; Wilcox et al., 2015). In 2019, 48% of all U.S. women were married, compared to 65% percent in 1950. As the marriage rates have declined, the age at first marriage has simultaneously increased. Now, the average age at marriage for men is 30 and for women is 28. By comparison, mean age at marriage was two years younger for both genders (i.e., 28 and 26, respectively) in 2010 (Martin et al., 2014; U.S. Census, n.d.-c). While these trends of lower marital rates, older ages at first marriage, and a rise in children born to unwed parents have been observed among all races, these patterns have been most pronounced among African Americans (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.-a, b, c).

According to the United States Bureau of the Census (n.d.-b) [U.S. Census Bureau], in 1960, 61% of African American households included a married couple (compared to 70% Whites); this rate decreased to 37% for African Americans (compared to 56% Whites) in 2019.

Overall, about 4.9 out of every 10 African American men and women had never married, the highest proportion among adults of any race (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.-c). The latest projection of millennial women predicts 51% of African American women to ever marry, compared to 84% of their White counterparts (Martin et. al, 2014). In 2017, the average age at first marriage hovered at 29 for all racial groups except for African Americans, which was at 32 (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.-a). Given the disparate rates of marriage among this group, it is important to understand why these trends are occurring and the long-term implications of these trends. Accordingly, the following section highlights the historical and contemporary explanations for the decline in marriage for African Americans.

The State of Black Marriage

Explanations for the Decline in Marriage

The decline in marriage is linked, in part, to out of wedlock births, the rise in male imprisonment, and poverty rates, all of which have challenged the ability to form and maintain long-term satisfying relationships (Edin & Reed, 2005; Fein & Fein, 2004; Gans, 2011; Pinderhughes, 2002). Therefore, it is important to understand the factors that could hinder African Americans from marrying. Historically, researchers, policymakers and program interventionists have focused on the nature and course of family patterns (Cready et al., 1997; Darity & Myers, 1995; Dubois, 1969; Fossett & Kiecolt, 1997; Gans, 2011; Hunter, 2017; James, 1998; Lichter et al., 1992; Moynihan, 1965; Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995; Wilson, 1987/2012). I will begin with this historical literature that has influenced current work on the decline in marriage among African Americans.

Culture of Poverty. Historical research regarding African American families has focused on the pathology of African Americans – suggesting that as a culture, African Americans were unable to form relationships and nuclear families, partially due to matriarchal households and absent or emasculated men (Gans, 2011; Moynihan, 1965). Other less controversial research emphasized the legacy of enslavement of African Americans in the United States (Dubois, 1969; Hunter, 2017). Researchers have noted that in the few states where marriage was not forbidden by law, the conditions under which slaves were forced to live exerted an ongoing and implacable disruption to their efforts to build cohesive families and stable marriages (Dubois, 1969; Hunter, 2017). More recently, scholars have countered these deficit perspectives, and attended to the influence of social and macro-structural factors on African American families (Cready et al., 1997; Fossett & Kiecolt, 1997; James, 1998; Lichter et al. 1992). I reviewed this literature pertaining to the culture of poverty because it reflects key threads in the literature on African American marriage.

Mate Availability. One structural explanation for the decline in marriage focuses on mate availability. The unequal sex ratio points out the imbalance in the male to female ratio, resulting from high mortality and disproportionate imprisonment rates of males, or other marriageability factors (e.g., low employment, morbidity, mortality, underemployment). Assuming heterosexual coupling, the premise is that when there are fewer available men relative to women, the marital prospects of females is more limited (Cready et al., 1997; Fossett & Kiecolt, 1997; James, 1998; Lichter et al. 1992). When attending to race, the unequal sex ratio, more than any other racial group, has influenced African American coupling. Scholars have reported that men who have stable employment are twice as likely to marry as men who

do not, noting that a Black man's chances of marrying increases with his earnings (Cready et al., 1997; Wood, 1995). Unfortunately, this poses a double negative for low earning Black males: first as being viewed as less attractive as husbands, and consequently, being less interested in or reluctant to marry because of the constraints upon their roles as financial providers (Darity & Myers, 1995; Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995; Wilson, 1987/2012). In conclusion, with the increased risks that African American men face of either being incarcerated or un- or underemployed there is a shortage of "marriageable" Black men. These factors are said to account for about half of the existing Black-White marriage gap (Chambers & Kravitz, 2011; Cready et al., 1997; Fossett & Kiecolt, 1993; Lichter & Crowley, 2004; Pinderhughes, 2002).

Subsequently, researchers encouraged policy makers to focus on relieving the problems associated with changing marital behaviors by way of supporting single parent families, public education, and employment opportunities for African American men (Blackman et al., 2005; Dixon, 2009; Malone-Colon, 2007; Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995). Other research has highlighted studies about men who are more educated or gainfully employed, but are also influenced by the sex ratio. Now deemed "marriageable" and more attractive and educated, gainfully employed Black men would have access to a larger dating pool. With the scarcity of men that Black women experience, assuming within-race partnering, coupled with the availability of eligible women for marriageable Black men, there may be a delay of marital timing and rates of lower marriage, given that men often influence the progression of the relationship towards marriage (Hurt, 2014; Miller et al., 2001; Stackman et al., 2016).

Other research suggests that a contributing factor to the mate availability of Black women is the higher reported preference to date and marry Black men, a preference shown

less often among their male counterparts (Banks, 2012; Crowder & Tolnay, 2000; Stackman et al., 2016). For instance, in 2017, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that among Black married women, 93% of them had a Black husband, whereas 85% of Black married men had a Black wife (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.-a). Researchers reported higher incidences of Black women dating “down” and not “out,” which refers to the pattern of marrying Black men with less education and less earning power, but not marrying out to other racial groups (Banks, 2012; Crowder & Tolnay, 2000; Marsh et al., 2007; Oppenheimer et al., 1997). There has been some effort in encouraging Black women to date interracially in order to increase the chances of finding a suitable mate (Banks, 2012). Due to the preference to marry Black men, Black women may be either compromised in their selection of a spouse, settling for a groom with less human capital than they would prefer, or remain single as they extend their search for an acceptable spouse (Banks, 2012; Crowder & Tolnay, 2000; Hurt, 2012; Stackman et al., 2016). I reviewed this body of literature considering the availability of marital partners, especially Black men, has been long-standing issue presented in the literature on the marriage Black marriage. SA until marriage may pose an additional barrier among African Americans who choose this premarital behavior. Researchers that examine other structural components for African Americans who do transition to marriage identify factors that are unique to marriages among this racial group.

A Distinct Experience: Cumulative Stress. Scholars who study African American intimate relationships have recognized that existing models of family and marital processes have primarily been developed using data sets consisting of exclusively White adults (Bryant et al., 2008, 2010; Cutrona et al., 2003). Therefore, scholars have not consistently used models and concepts specific to understanding African American relationships and marriage. Implications of

this work have highlighted that when compared to other racial groups, African Americans report higher incidences of stress, which are associated with relationship and marital outcomes. Stressors such as financial strain, adverse work conditions, family obligations, racial discrimination, and minority stress often take the form of micro-aggressions (Conger, 2002; Cutrona et al., 2003; Meyer, 1995; Orbuch & Eyster, 1997; Sue et al., 2007). Researchers have since focused on understanding to what degree these stressors influence the intimate lives of African Americans.

Many scholars have utilized the mundane extreme environmental stress model, which implies that the historical treatment of African Americans within the United States may continue to influence Black family life (Peters & Massey, 1983). That is, stressors may stem from conditions in an individual's macrosocial environment. These stressors are closely linked to broader historical events (i.e., slavery) and such events influence relationship quality. For example, with a greater proportion of African Americans being impoverished, the unemployment and underemployment of African Americans has relevance to the decline in marriage rates and divorce (Bulanda & Brown, 2007; Semega et al., 2019; Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995). Financial strain is a dominant stressor often linked to marital outcomes (Chambers & Kravitz, 2011; Cutrona et al., 2003; Mincy & Pouncy, 2003).

Financial strain has been linked to other related stressors. For instance, couples who experience financial strain are more likely to live in impoverished neighborhoods, which increases the odds of experiencing racial discrimination (Abdullah, 2019). It is worth noting, however, that racial discrimination is not limited to the underprivileged. For instance, educated and gainfully employed African American men often report experiencing racial discrimination in

the workplace. This has been linked to a husband's need to assert a sense of control within his household, thus causing marital conflict with his spouse (Orbuch & Eyster, 1997). Other studies link financial strain to the presence of children in the home at time of marriage for African Americans (Bryant et al., 2016; Orbuch et al. 2000; Pew Research Center, 2011), or obligations to extended family and kin often felt in spite of the ability to do so comfortably (Bryant et al., 2010). These findings are in direct contrast to studies using samples of White married couples, who are less likely to enter marriage with children and may receive financial support from relatives (Orbuch, 2002).

Scholars have highlighted how individual and psychological factors can buffer or moderate the effects of stressors on marital outcomes. These factors include racial identity, religiosity, social networks, and problem solving (Bryant et al. 2010). Others have proposed that couples who exhibit high quality marriages may be able to withstand some of the stressors experienced by African Americans, more so than couples who report lower marital quality. For instance, McNeil Smith et al. (2020) found that racism-specific support from spouses was associated with better self-reported health (mental, physical and general) among African American engaged and married couples. This supports other scholars who have stated that a marital relationship can be a salient, significant, and influential form of social support to promote health and stress management (Gardner & Cutrona, 2004; Lewis et al., 2006). Marital quality can moderate factors that are beyond one's control (e.g., being born Black) and stressors that accompany it. This body of research was included to provide context to the existing contributing factors known to hinder African American marriages. Conversely, there is

another area of research on Black marriage that provides useful information on how attitudes, values, and beliefs are barriers for African Americans.

Attitudes, Values, and Beliefs. Scholars have also focused on personal or psychological factors that have served as barriers to marriage for African Americans (Ashley et al., 2013; Chaney, 2011; Chaney & Monroe, 2011; Hurt, 2013, 2014; Perry, 2013; Perry & Brooms, 2013). For instance, researchers have examined the attitudes, values, and beliefs about marriage among Black men and women, and how their perceptions may influence marital outcomes. Scholars have attended to marital messages received during childhood, how figures in their family or community modeled strong healthy marriages (or the lack thereof), and how these individuals perceived the marriage market and the marital expectations for themselves (Dixon, 2009; Stackman et al., 2016). Much of this work has drawn on qualitative data. Scholars have gathered personal accounts of marriage, about what marriage means to study participants, how life experiences have helped shaped this meaning, and their thoughts on the current state of Black marriage (Ashley et al., 2013; Chaney, 2011; Chaney & Monroe, 2011; Hurt, 2013, 2014; Perry, 2013; Perry & Brooms, 2013).

In one qualitative study, Hurt (2014) explored 52 married Black men's opinions as to why Black women remain disproportionately single. She reported that in the opinions of Black men, structural components still served as barriers for marriage, but gender relations, marriage education, socialization, and individual development may have also influenced marital prospects of Black women. Some men even offered advice for women to focus on their own development, spiritual growth, and "trust in the Lord" to bless them with a mate (Hurt, 2014, p. 103). This study, as well as other qualitative literature, confirm the importance of relational

dynamics between Black men and women in the progression towards marriage (Chaney, 2011; Edin, 2000; Hurt, 2013, 2014; Hurt et al., 2017; Perry, 2013; Perry & Brooms, 2013; Simons et al., 2012).

In a more recent study, Brooks and Moore (2020) explored a sample of 35 African American young adult women (ranging from 19 to 32 years) and their perceptions of relationships and marriage, and ultimately, what they were looking for in long-term companionship. Their narrative data corroborated the existing literature, noting that their attitudes toward marriage were often from the lens of observing female relatives growing up, noting that the women in their lives usually carried most of the weight of the relationship in terms of household duties, financial responsibilities and parenting (James et al., 2016; Perry & Brooms, 2013; Stackman et al., 2016). These marital messages may account for the women's emphasis on education and financial status in their search for suitable partners. Another interesting finding is that personality traits of a potential partner superseded physical appearance, noting qualities such as humor, trust, religious practices, honesty, and ambition as being important (Brooks & Moore, 2020). The findings were similar to a survey of a larger sample of African Americans ($N=344$) (King & Allen, 2009). Brooks and Moore (2020) did not find a preference for marrying a Black man; this contradicted others who noted this as a barrier for Black women (Banks, 2012; Crowder & Tolnay, 2000; Stackman et al., 2016). This body of literature was added to highlight the existing attitudes and beliefs revealed by scholars who study African Americans' marriage that have been associated with relationships and marriage for this population. Further exploration of SA may reveal additional attitudes and beliefs, particularly religious in nature, that may also link to African American marriage.

Overall, these works provide accounts from African Americans who believe in the institution of marriage and its benefits, and of those who still desire it. These findings give meaning to what men and women were expecting of marriage and how their families provided context to these expectations.

Transformational Change

Andrew Cherlin, a distinguished scholar who has studied marriage for several decades, first argued that marriage has undergone a process of de-institutionalization, which means “the weakening of the social norms that define people's behavior in a social institution such as marriage” (2004, p. 848). Cherlin’s thesis began as a critique of the emergence of the changing division of labor in the home and an increase in childbearing outside of marriage, which undermined the institution of marriage. Cherlin (2004) later expanded this thesis in response to the rise in cohabiting unions and the emergence of same-sex marriages. Two alternatives of the de-institutionalization of marriage warrant further discussion. The first alternative was a re-institutionalization of marriage, which entailed a rise in the proportion of people who marry and an increase in children born to married couples. The second alternative was a continuation of current trends, in which marriage remains de-institutionalized but is common and distinctive, and retains its special and highly valued place in the family system (Cherlin, 2004).

U.S. adults are increasingly becoming more decisive about who they marry, when they marry and whether they should marry (Cherlin, 2020; Hymowitz et al., 2013; Martin et al., 2014). Scholars have noted educational attainment, establishing one’s career and stabilizing finances as personal goals to accomplish before getting married (Cherlin, 2009, 2020). The retreat from marriage by U.S. adults has recently been observed in the decrease in divorce

rates (Jordan, 2019; Steverman, 2018). The retreat from marriage allows those who choose to remain single to focus on an education or training, establish a career and marry later, if they so choose (Cherlin, 2020; Jordan, 2019).

Scholars have called the practices and beliefs that restructure the progression to marriage *transformational change* (Thornton et al., 2012). Cherlin (2020) revisited his thesis of de-institutionalization of marriage and proposed a more operational definition of transformational change: “A change in which an attribute that reflects the power of marriage to organize people’s beliefs and behavior goes from being the experience of a large majority of the population to being the experience of a minority” (p. 66). Two behaviors that have undergone transformational change include the acceptance and normalization of premarital sex and cohabitation (Cherlin, 2020). Scholars have also noted that although the majority of individuals have premarital sex, cohabit, and maybe even have children before marriage, there is still a slow but steady transition into a marital union (Cherlin, 2020; Martin et al., 2014; Musick & Michelmore, 2018). While this appears to be a trend for the majority, after exploring studies among African American samples, the trajectory from cohabitation to marriage does not follow the same pattern.

Cohabitation and African Americans Couples

Over the past several decades, scholars have debated how living with someone before marriage influences the trajectory to marriage. Cohabitation scholars have explored motivations. One popular theme is that cohabitation is a step leading to marriage (Brown, 2000; Bumpass et al., 1991). Concomitantly, there is a growing recognition among researchers that not all cohabitations are part of a process that leads to marriage and are instead an

alternative form of marriage, especially among African Americans who may desire romantic involvement, but not marriage (Barr et al., 2015; Edin, 2000; Edin & Reed, 2005; Manning et al., 2004).

Researchers have directly linked income and education with cohabitation among African Americans. Black men are less likely to marry a woman with whom they are cohabiting if their earnings and educational levels are low (Kuo & Raley, 2016; Manning et al., 2004; Oppenheimer, 2003). In contrast, scholars have found that Black men were more likely to marry than cohabit when they were financially secure. For these men, the chances of them staying married increased (James, 1998; Wilcox et al., 2015). Furthermore, some authors have concluded that cohabitation was not a chosen alternative to marriage among some low-income African Americans couples, but rather, a way to pool resources and be romantically involved (Chaney & Marsh, 2008). Other researchers have attended to variables that facilitate relationship transitions such as couple status, engagement, commitment, and overall relationship quality (Chaney & Marsh, 2008; Chaney & Monroe, 2011; Chaney, 2014; Chaney et al., 2014).

In a series of qualitative studies, scholars employed samples of cohabiting ($n=30$) and married ($n=31$) African American couples and revealed that for most couples, the onset of their relationship was marked by moving in together, having a child together, or combining finances, with no differences between the cohabiting and married couples (Chaney & Marsh, 2008). Among cohabiting couples, most desired marriage, were engaged and had plans to marry in the future (Chaney & Monroe, 2011). When asked “what motivated their partner to commit to them,” most reported personality, love, commitment, honesty, and friendship. Few participants

were unsure or unable to answer the question (Chaney, 2014). In a subsequent study, scholars examined the relationship status and relationship quality of cohabiting couples. They hypothesized that since the act of getting engaged signaled positive change in a relationship, partners who were engaged reported higher levels of relationship quality in terms of love, commitment, and satisfaction. The data did not support this hypothesis. Engaged couples reported higher levels of love, but no significant differences in commitment or satisfaction when compared to non-engaged cohabiters (Chaney et al., 2014). Barr et al. (2015) used data from a sample of nearly 800 African Americans. They examined the extent to which cohabitation might reposition African American couples toward marriage by influencing their perceptions about the costs and benefits of marriage. Their findings suggested that cohabitation was associated with changed marital beliefs, specifically more favorable beliefs, for both men and women.

There is one notable limitation to these studies on African American cohabitation: they did not assess participants' long-term outcomes in terms of marital onset or later marital quality. Without measures of marital or relationship history, and patterns of co-residence or living arrangements, it is hard to infer that cohabitation was a precursor to marriage. For instance, Brown (2004) used data from both waves of the National Survey of Family and Households (1987-1988 and 1992-1994), the largest representative sample of cohabiters available, and found that 20% of African Americans who reported marriage expectations while cohabiting actually married at time of re-interview. Findings from between-group studies, such as Sassler et al. (2012), found that Blacks progressed more slowly into cohabiting unions than their White and Hispanic counterparts. Furthermore, Blacks in newly formed sexual

relationships were far more likely to remain dating than to either move in together (a pattern dominant among White respondents), or to break up (a pattern dominant among Hispanic respondents). Scholars asserted that Blacks were more likely to remain in long term, sexual relationships. For instance, Daniels et al. (2017) reviewed the status of unwed parents at both year 1 and year 9 following their child's birth. Their findings revealed that Black mothers were 60-65% less likely to transition into marriage after a non-marital birth, relative to White and Hispanic mothers, even when accounting for the mother's educational attainment, leaving a large number of unions either dissolving or moving on to a new partner (Daniels et al., 2017).

The research presented above on African Americans cohabiters adds value to understanding the lived experiences. However, no justification was found that cohabitation, in and of itself, facilitated marriage or served as a valuable alternative.

Premarital Sex, Children and Households among African Americans

Scholars have noted a transformational change in the beliefs, practices and acceptability of behaviors surrounding the institution of marriage. The other notable change is the occurrence and acceptance of sexual intercourse prior to marriage. There is clear variability in the influence and outcomes of this transformational change across racial groups, especially among African Americans. African American adults, both males and females, have reported more premarital sex and sexual partners when compared to their White counterparts (Daniels, 2017; Sassler, 2012; Olmstead et al., 2013; Teachman, 2004). Scholars have also suggested that those who have engaged in premarital sex often had more casual sex outside of committed relationships. This results in a higher number of sexual partners, and involvement in more short-term romantic relationships (Olmstead et al., 2013; Teachman, 2004). Furthermore,

entering into and then breaking up with serious romantic partners is reported as emotionally traumatic for women (Meier, 2007; Owen et al., 2010; Rhoades & Stanley, 2014). If transitions in and out of sexual and romantic relationships persisted into emerging and young adulthood, long-term mental and emotional effects, especially for women, have been implied (Rhoades & Stanley, 2014). For instance, African Americans have faced greater challenges in forming committed relationships built on mutual respect, fidelity, trust and affection (Raley & Sweeney, 2009; Raley et al., 2015). It is also reported that Blacks were less likely to enjoy high quality, stable partnerships, which was often due to concerns about infidelity, multiple partner fertility and distrust, when compared to Whites (Edin & Reed, 2005; Raley et al., 2015), thus implying that Blacks in long-term committed relationships and marriages have reported similar concerns as their unmarried counterparts. Put simply, for those who have successfully formed a romantic relationship that led to marriage, scholars suggest that the benefits of marriage (more income, lower likelihood to face poverty, increased likelihood to own a home, and lower health risk behaviors) were contingent upon the perceived quality of that marriage (Ali & Ajilore, 2011; Bulanda & Brown, 2007; Kelmer et al., 2013; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2016).

Researchers have found that for couples who entered marriage, Black couples were more likely to enter marriage with children, (55% vs. 22% White) whether it was their own or by forming a blended family, with Black men becoming stepparents more often than Black women (Orbuch, 2002; Pew Research Center, 2011). These families started off with added stressors without the benefit of forming a marital bond between spouses, prior to having children, that is offered in some marital unions. In blended African American families, Black men, in particular, navigate both a new relationship with their spouse, as well as a new relationship with their new

step-children, which may create strain in a new marital union (Bryant et al., 2016; Williams & Parra, 2019).

The evidence presented suggests that the premarital sexual behaviors among African Americans include earlier onset, higher numbers of partners, higher rates of intercourse, and lower use of contraceptives—behaviors that are associated with children born to unwed mothers, higher rates of infidelity, and multi-partner fertility (Pflieger et al., 2013). These factors serve as barriers to forming and sustaining healthy relationships built on trust, commitment and fidelity (Owen, 2013; Stanley & Rhoades, 2009), but are also echoed in the reporting of low-quality relationships, the overall decline in marriage rates, and high instances of divorce among African Americans (Bulanda & Brown, 2007; Chambers & Kravitz, 2011; Kelmer et al., 2013; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2016).

Due to children born to unwed parents and the prevalence of single parent households, “the weakening of marriage in the field of intimate partnerships has [also] been transformational for this group, and in this sense, marriage has been deinstitutionalized for African Americans” (Cherlin, 2020, p.70). The current state of Black marriage still remains a concern for scholars, policy makers and clergy, considering the known benefits of marital unions for individual, family, and child well-being, and the benefits attributed to African Americans specifically, as outlined in the following section (Blackman et al., 2005; Chambers & Kravitz, 2011; Edin & Reed, 2005; Fein & Fein, 2004; Wilcox et al., 2015).

Benefit of Marriage for African Americans

Scholars have confirmed that marriage brings personal benefits. For instance, married people live longer, have better access to health care, enjoy a more satisfying sex life,

experience less stress, live a healthier lifestyle, and have lower rates of heart disease, diabetes, and depression compared to their single counterparts (Doherty & Anderson, 2004; Marks et al., 2008; Waite & Gallagher, 2001; Wilson, 2002). Although 29% percent of African Americans are currently married, researchers have shown that happily married African Americans are healthier, wealthier and have better overall well-being for themselves and for their families (Marks et al., 2008; U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.-c ; Wilcox, 2008; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2016;). Collectively, even when scholars have controlled for contributing factors (e.g., education and income), the findings have been consistent that married Black adults, compared to those who are unmarried, have more income, are less likely to experience poverty, are more likely to own a home, and are more likely to be happy (Blackman et al., 2005; Dixon, 2009; Wolfinger & Wilcox, 2008). Researchers have also found that married African American men and women engage in fewer risky behaviors (use of tobacco, illegal drugs, heavy alcohol use, criminal activity) than unmarried individuals in both young and middle adulthood (Ali & Ajilore, 2011; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2016). Additionally, those who married later seem to fare as well by midlife as those who marry early and stay married (Green et al., 2012; Sampson, 1995). These benefits have not been seen with couples who were in long-term committed or cohabiting relationships, and were also contingent upon the perceived quality of that marriage (Bulanda & Brown, 2007; Chaney & Monroe, 2011; Kelmer et al., 2013; Malone-Colon, 2007; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2016). In addition to personal benefits, marriage among Black Americans appeared to influence future generations and promote community well-being (Blackman et al., 2005; Dixon, 2009). The psychological and economic benefits that marriage has brought to individuals and couples, in turn, has influenced their children; providing better education, physical health and the

possibility of intergenerational transmission of these benefits (Blackman et al., 2005; Dixon, 2009). Furthermore, higher marriage rates have promoted civic engagement, so these benefits have gone beyond the family unit and expanded to the communities in which these families dwell (Chambers, 2011; Knopp, 2017; Marks, 2008).

A Facilitator: Religion

For African American couples—religious couples, specifically—(a) shared religious beliefs; (b) religious practices performed together, such as prayer and church attendance; and (c) church involvement, have all been said to have contributed to their relationship quality and served as a long-term protective influence (Cutrona et al., 2011; Marks et al., 2008; Wilcox et al., 2015, Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2016). Wilcox and Wolfinger (2016), who drew on national survey and in-depth interview data, found positive influences on relationships and marriage among underrepresented couples. The authors found that married and unmarried Black couples who attended church together were significantly more likely to enjoy happy relationships than Black and Latino couples who did not. They argued that churches promoted a “code of decency” encompassing hard work, temperance, and personal responsibility, concepts that benefitted both Black and Latino families (Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2016).

For African American men, in particular, one scholar found that the meaning Black men attached to marriage was related to their individual faith and contributed to their decision to marry (Hurt, 2013, 2014). Other scholars found that for husbands, low spirituality was linked to more reports of negative marital quality. Husbands’ religiosity was related to their own and their wife’s marital satisfaction. The more religious husbands were, the more satisfied their wives were (Fincham et al., 2011). Considering African American women, Cutrona et al. (2011)

found that religiosity was a significant factor in marital status, relationship quality and relationship stability. Explicitly, religious women were more likely to marry than to cohabit. Married women rated their relationships more positively than did those who were cohabiting. Furthermore, religion was associated with women's relationship quality, thus predicting marital stability, a finding supported by other researchers (Marks et al., 2008; Wilcox et al., 2015; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2016).

The importance of incorporating religion into any mechanism believed to facilitate marriage among African Americans can be justified by the personal accounts provided in Hurt's (2014) qualitative study, which examined the linkages among religion, readiness for marriage, and factors that facilitated the transition to marriage. One of the questions asked of married men in this study was, "Who or what was the greatest factor in encouraging you to marry your spouse...and why?" (p. 456). The common theme in their responses, second to their wives' characteristics, was their spirituality, further attributing prayer, and their relationship with and guidance from God, in their decision to marry (Hurt, 2014). This aligns with other work that shows that African Americans, in general, are more religious, attend church, and read their Bible more often than Whites or other racial groups (Cox & Diamant, 2018; Masci et al., 2018). Furthermore, religion fosters positive outcomes in African American marriages, in terms of formation, quality, satisfaction and stability (Fincham et al., 2011; Hurt, 2014; Marks et al., 2012; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2016; Wolfinger & Wilcox, 2008). Scholars have implied that a more in-depth investigation into the religious practices of African American adults (such as prayer and behavioral practices influenced by religion) is warranted, given that for most individuals

within this population, desire, expect, and plan to marry in the future (Dollahite et al., 2004; Marks et al., 2008)

A Case for Heterogeneity in the Sexual Behaviors of African Americans

Consequently, researchers called for the collaboration of churches, institutions of higher education, media outlets, and scholars to promote marriage among Blacks (Blackman et al., 2005; Malone-Colon, 2007). There is evidence that the African American community is making their own effort to unite Black men and women together in marriage with an initiative focused on enhancing interventions and premarital educational programs for African American couples, as well as highlighting known facilitators and characteristics of healthy Black marriages (Beach et al., 2011; Chaney et al., 2016; Fincham et al., 2011; Hurt, 2014; Marks et al., 2008). Further, the subject of remaining abstinent until marriage among African Americans has caught the attention of the national media (Bowman, 2016; Entertainment Tonight, 2015; Franklin & Good, 2016; TMZ 2015).

Although transformational change has occurred for many adults, this transformational change does not apply to all, African Americans included. It appears that there could be individual and couple differences, specifically, some couples are abstaining from sex prior to marriage. Therefore, the remainder of this literature review will focus on the work of scholars who have examined individuals and couples who choose this pattern of courtship and relationship behavior, beginning with the theoretical and conceptual frameworks that guide a couple's decision to practice SA, and help explain how SA may link to relationship and marital outcomes

Theory and Conceptualization of SA

Sexual Restraint

A primary theoretical framework is sexual restraint theory, which was proposed by Busby and colleagues (2010) and asserted that couples who decided to delay sexual involvement were more likely to enjoy better relationship outcomes. Sexual restraint theory further holds that sexual involvement during the couple formation processes, particularly in the early stages, may be detrimental to overall relationship development. In particular, the relative sequencing of sexual behavior, relationship commitment (i.e., sex precedes commitment vs. commitment precedes sex), and attachment has been previously hypothesized to be a critical factor in determining how sexual initiation may influence overall couple development (Metts, 2004). Couples who consciously choose to delay or abstain from sexual intimacy during early couple formation allow for relationship processes such as communication, commitment and other social processes to become the foundation of their attraction to each other, a developmental difference that may become critical as couples move past an initial period of sexual attraction and excitement into a relationship more characterized by companionship and partnership (Busby et al., 2010; Metts, 2004; Stanley, Rhoades, et al., 2006; Stanley & Rhoades, 2009; Willoughby et al., 2014). A conceptual framework that informed the sexual constraint theory is sliding versus deciding.

Sliding versus Deciding

Stanley, Rhoades, and Markman (2006) developed this conceptual framework after decades of research on romantic relationships, commitment, as well as longitudinal studies that connect premarital behaviors and actions to relational and marital outcomes. Their work

focused on relationship transitions such as (a) becoming sexual, (b) becoming pregnant or having a child (c) living together and (d) deciding to marry, all having a potential to be life-altering. The main finding in this line of research is that people often “slide” through important transitions in relationships, rather than “deciding” what they plan to do. The action of sliding versus deciding has relationship consequences (Clements et al., 2004; Owen et al., 2013; Stanley, Rhoades & Markman, 2006).

Most of the research on sliding versus deciding has been examined in cohabiting and marital relationships. For instance, using quantitative and qualitative data, scholars have shown that for couples who slid into cohabitation without first discussing what this might mean for their relationship or before they mutually committed to marry reported lower levels of relationship quality, both while living together and after marriage (Stanley et al., 2004; Stanley & Rhoades, 2009). These couples reported lower levels of relationship quality, higher levels of distress, and rarely moved forward to marriage (Edin, 2005; Chaney & Fairfax, 2013; Stanley, Rhoades, Amato et al., 2010).

Informed Decision Making. In contrast, Owen et al. (2010) found that individuals who tended to use more thoughtful relationship decision-making processes (e.g., being more deliberate in their partner selection and in the steps of relationships) reported higher levels of personal dedication and higher relationship quality with their current partners. Scholars have reported that individuals in dating relationships who discussed and shared a similar vision about the long-term trajectory of the relationship reported less personal stress, better relationship functioning, and engaged in fewer casual romantic relationships (Loving, 2007; Owen & Fincham, 2011). Therefore, making decisions on when to embark on critical moments

throughout relationship stages was advantageous to both relationship formation and long-term commitment. Researchers have examined the effects of premarital sex on marital outcomes; Rhoades and Stanley (2014) found that marriage quality was adversely associated with having sex with someone other than one's spouse, with having multiple sex partners, and with having a marriage begun as a hookup. Other scholars have linked having sex prior to making decisions about one's future (sliding versus deciding) with other adverse marital outcomes such as lower quality of health and happiness, higher incidences of infidelity, and higher rates of divorce (Owen et al., 2013; Stanley & Rhoades, 2009; Teachman, 2004; Uecker, 2008). Their work highlights how making decisions (or the lack of) within a relationship can influence later relationship outcomes (Stanley, Rhoades & Markman, 2006; Stanley & Rhoades, 2009).

Relationship Sequencing. The relationship sequence—with sex, cohabitation, and sometimes children preceding marriage—has become normative (Cherlin, 2020; Stanley & Rhoades, 2009), with 80 percent of today's young adults reporting that marriage is an important part of their life plans, with just as many having already engaged in sexual behavior or lived with someone prior to marriage (Hymowitz et al., 2013; Martinez & Abma, 2020). Stanley and Rhoades (2009) established two models that demonstrated how a sequential order of transitions in relationships may foster very different results.

The Lower Risk Sequence of Relationship Transition sequence starts with 1) attraction to another person, followed by 2) gathering information. Gathering information includes three very distinct forms of data: 2a) potential threats, such as violence or substance abuse; 2b) compatibility, in terms of values, communication, and expectations, and 2c) potential for commitment, as to the desire for a future together, clear expectations, and fidelity. Once

gathering information is complete, the sequence ends with 3) a series of mutual decisions made between the couple on whether and how the relationship should progress—sexual contact, cohabitation, having a child, and marriage (Stanley & Rhoades, 2009). This model demonstrated an order of relationship transitions to reduce the risk of negative relationship outcomes (Stanley, Rhoades & Markman, 2006).

Contrary to the aforementioned sequence, the higher risk sequence starts with 1) attraction to another person, then 2) “slides” into major transitions such as sexual contact (in which sexual bonding is likely to occur), cohabitation and having children, all known to increase the risk of establishing additional life-altering constraints: financial obligations, joint possessions, and children (Stanley & Rhoades, 2009). These constraints are formed prior to gathering sufficient information about a potential partner (i.e., risky behavior, compatibility, likelihood of commitment). Stanley and Rhoades (2009) further attest that “in the model of higher risk, the information that could support the best decision is obtained *after* one has reduced their degrees of freedom,” thus reducing “their options before making a choice” (p. 39).

These models suggest two important facilitators to relationship formation: 1) information received prior to a transition can help one make better decisions, and 2) making decisions, rather than sliding, supports the development and maintenance of commitment in the future (Stanley & Rhoades, 2009). While constraints have a negative connotation, especially in relationships of dysfunction or abuse, they perform a very positive and important role in marriage. Constraints are said to slow down a person’s decision to depart a relationship when

things get tough, an act to hold a couple together, often described as commitment (Rhoades et al., 2010; Stanley & Markman, 1992; Stanley, Rhoades, & Whitton, 2010).

Dedicated vs. Constraint Commitment. Couples who follow a lower-risk sequence of transitions are said to foster dedicated, personal commitment (Rhoades et al., 2010, 2012b). This form of commitment often starts with a decision to willingly invest in building the relationship, which has been proven to be a vital means of sustaining long-term marital happiness (Knopp et al., 2014). Stanley and Markman (1992) described four components of dedication, a component of commitment that relates to 1) a desire for a future together, 2) a sense of being a part of a team, 3) giving high priority to the relationship, and 4) a willingness to sacrifice for the other, all of which are components found in couples who experience a satisfying and stable marriage (Rhoades et al., 2010; Stanley & Markman, 1992; Stanley, Rhoades, & Whitton, 2010).

On the contrary, couples who follow a high-risk sequence of transitions are said to lead to constraint commitment, which is described as a force that resists separation of a couple, even when one or both partners would prefer to leave the relationship (Knopp et al., 2015; Rhoades et al., 2010, 2012b). Constraint commitment has been attributed to long-standing toxic relationships, cohabiting unions with no plans of marriage, children born to unwed parents, and marriages that often lead to divorce (Rhoades et al., 2010, 2012b). While constraint commitment may help a couple avoid impulsive decisions at critical times, this type of commitment is not attributed to building a happy, fulfilling marriage (Rhoades et al., 2010).

To conclude, the theoretical and conceptual frameworks discussed in this section helped to guide the present study in several ways: although cohabitation and premarital sex has

become normative in intimate relationships for all Americans, the literature suggests that these behaviors may be patterned differently for African Americans (Cherlin, 2020). Specifically, researchers studying cohabitation and premarital practices of African Americans have reported a higher number of sexual partners, involvement in more short-term romantic relationships, lower quality relationships, and a lower likelihood to progress to cohabitation or marriage (Daniels, 2017; Sassler, 2012; Olmstead et al., 2013; Teachman, 2004). Applying the theory of sliding versus deciding to these findings implies that some African Americans are sliding into relationship transitions (having sex, living together, having children), thus following a higher risk relationship sequence, which is said to lead to constraint commitment, which is often represented among toxic relationships, cohabiting unions with no plans of marriage, children born to unwed parents, and marriages that often lead to divorce (Rhoades et al., 2010, 2012b). This conceptual and theoretical application helps to explain the mechanisms at work in the marital trends of African Americans.

Lastly, couples who practice deciding versus sliding into life-altering transitions (when to have sex, cohabit, or have children) seem to be advantaged in terms of fostering a slower pace in a relationship, making more informed decisions, and promoting dedicated commitment within a relationship (Rhoades et al., 2010; Stanley & Markman, 1992; Stanley, Rhoades, & Whitton, 2010). Because this study seeks to understand the lived experiences and relationship processes among African American couples who remain sexually abstinent before marriage, the concept of sliding versus deciding developed by Stanley, Rhoades and Markman (2006), and the broader theory of sexual constraint by Busby et al. (2010) inform this study, in terms of how a couple's decision to abstain from sex until marriage may be associated with relationship and

marital outcomes. I will now turn from the theoretical and conceptual frameworks that were used to inform this study, to the extant literature that focuses on sexual decision-making, specifically among individuals who choose to abstain from sex until marriage, and later how this decision manifests in the coupling process.

Literature on SA

SA in Adulthood

Unmarried young adults report lower rates of sexual activity as compared to their parents and grandparents at their same age (Twenge et al., 2017a, b). According to a report published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2020), 23% of adults reported having no sex at all, as compared to 18% in the late 1990s (Copen et al., 2016). Further, Twenge et al. (2017a) found that adults had sex about nine fewer times annually than what was reported in the 1990s. These adults were pacing to have fewer sex partners than the two prior generations. Additionally, people now in their early 20s are two and a half times as likely to be abstinent than Gen Xers (ages 40-54 years old) were at that age, with 15% reporting having had no sex at all since they turned 18. Taken in sum, these data demonstrate that the prevalence of SA in adults may be on the rise. Eisenberg et al. (2009) analyzed data from the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth to examine SA among unmarried adults aged 25–45 (men: $N=2,469$; women: $N=5,120$). Of the 13.9% males and 8.9% females that reported never having sex, religiosity, church attendance, and not drinking alcohol were related. Highly educated women had a higher odds of not having had sexual intercourse.

Some scholars previously attributed SA in adulthood to “hook up” behavior that, by definition, can vary from: “20 minutes of strenuous kissing” to “spending the night fully

clothed,” with most adults reporting that such encounters did not lead to sexual intercourse (Bergdall et al., 2012; Julian, 2018; Owen et al., 2010). Slater (2013) noted “romantic stunts” in today's society, a decline of organic, in-person expressions of interest, attributed to online dating and dating apps, thus reducing the opportunity of sexual intercourse. Given reduced sexual behaviors, it is important to explore the motivating factors of SA in adulthood.

Utilizing a sample of college-aged students, Dunsmore (2005) conducted a qualitative study and revealed motivating factors of SA. He also developed the Sexual Abstinence Motivation Scale (SAMS). This scale was pilot tested to explore the motivating factors of sexually inexperienced adults. Religion was the most frequent motivating factor; other motivations included beliefs about “positive outcomes of abstinence,” fear of a “physical/sexual relationship,” “concerns related to social responsibility,” fear of “emotional/moral consequences,” and the desire to gain control in or manipulate aspects of a relationship (Dunsmore, 2005, pp. 19–21). Scholars have not explored SA motivation in samples of African American couples.

Religion was the dominant factor in Ashley et al.'s (2013) study of Black college students who identified as Seventh-Day Adventist. Participants were asked to report their attitudes about SA retrospectively. Females agreed with abstinence more so than males. Younger students supported SA more so than older students. Self-efficacy, or their perceived ability to abstain from sex until marriage, was more of a determining factor than their religious beliefs (Ashley et al., 2013). In another study, Cooke-Jackson et al. (2015) explored the memorable messages about sexual behavior among 65 Black young adults who had never had sex. Although religious beliefs were the primary motivator for abstinence in this sample, other contributing

factors such as “waiting for the right one” and “sex is too scary,” implied concerns about contracting sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and having unplanned pregnancies. To conclude, these researchers noted that religiosity is associated with SA in adulthood (Ashley et al., 2013; Dunsmore, 2005; Eisenberg et al., 2009). These findings corroborate key points that Cherlin (2020) made about a change in how religion functions as a pillar of family life. Religious doctrine communicates messages of rewards for adults who follow values and norms, and sanctions for adults who do not.

SA after Debut

Another finding that emerged within the literature on adults is the notion of "reclaiming" one's virginity after sexual debut. Rasberry and Goodson (2009) explored SA among 1,133 college students who responded to an online survey on sexual activity and abstinence, intending to determine the prevalence of adults who practiced SA. The scholars found that 34% of their sample were "primary abstainers," young adults who never had penile-vaginal sex and made a conscious commitment to abstain from it. Another 12.5% of the sample, referred to as "secondary abstainers," had penile-vaginal sex but made a conscious commitment to abstain from sex in the future. When examining differences between the two groups, the authors found that those who had never had sex were more likely to be motivated by religious factors and the opinions of others (parents, family, and friends). In contrast, those who had a sexual past were more motivated by factors related to themselves and their futures (e.g., avoiding feelings of guilt, being successful). Additionally, past experiences also played a role in their motivation to abstain, particularly after having contracted an STD or participated in an abstinence program as an adolescent (Rasberry & Goodson, 2009).

Additionally, Bradley et al. (2013) conducted a qualitative study to investigate secondary abstinence motivations among African American females. The results of their interviews with 20 young women included additional motivations not identified in previous studies, including feeling used for sex, partner infidelity, and abuse or sexual assault. Also, young women were motivated to abstain to focus on improving certain aspects of their lives, such as providing a better life for their children. This “better life” entailed starting or completing school, improving living situations or current employment status, redirecting their focus back to God and religious principles, restoring a positive self-image from past relationships, and starting a new committed relationship with a special person, or getting married (Bradley et al., 2013).

In summary, recent trends toward less sexual behavior among adults imply that there are adults who practice SA beyond adolescence, with some returning to SA after sexual debut. Scholars who explored underlying motivations for SA in adulthood for African Americans revealed differences in those who abstained after debut (Bradley et al., 2013; Rasberry & Goodson, 2009). Specifically, scholars have found secondary abstainers were less likely motivated by religious factors and outside influences (e.g., beliefs of family and friends), more likely to be motivated by past relationship experiences (e.g., feeling used for sex, partner infidelity) and hope for a “better life” for themselves (e.g., completing school, restoring a positive self-image). This “better life” often included a committed relationship and marriage to a future partner (Bradley et al., 2013; Rasberry & Goodson, 2009). Therefore, I now turn to the literature on the known associations between SA and relationship and marital outcomes to underscore how an individual’s or couple’s decision to refrain from sex until marriage may be linked to future relationship and marital outcomes.

SA Associations to Relationships and Marriage

SA and Marital Satisfaction and Stability. The extant literature on SA has primarily focused on the long-term outcomes of adolescents, adults, and families. In Wilson's (2008) literature review on sexual abstinence and sexual abstinence programs, one of his eight conclusions was that SA before marriage "fosters a healthy and happy family for children, adolescents, and adults" (2008, p. 2). Studies on SA outcomes were considered.

Scholars have linked premarital abstinence with educational attainment, physical and psychological health, and marital success (e.g., satisfaction, stability) (Larson & Holman, 1994; Wilcox, 2008). Scholars have revealed that husbands and wives with no premarital sexual experience tend to score higher on scales of marital happiness and are significantly less likely to divorce (Burgess & Wallin, 1953; Finger et al., 2004). Men were 37% less likely and women were 24% less likely to divorce, when compared to their counterparts who engaged in premarital sex (Laumann et al., 2000). One other scholar implied that premarital sex made marriage "less special" and couples who engaged in premarital sex were less committed to marriage (Whyte, 1990). When scholars controlled for demographic and sociocultural variables associated with marital outcomes, including premarital births, religion, and education, other confounding variables that may link to SA and marital outcomes began to surface. For instance, in Kahn and London's study (1991), women who were sexually active prior to marriage were at higher risk for marital disruption. Yet, when they controlled for unobserved characteristics which influence both the likelihood of premarital sex and the likelihood of divorce in their analyses, the differential was no longer statistically significant. This prompted a review of studies that observe other variables that may explain the linkage between SA and marital outcomes.

Causal, Indirect and Selection Effects of SA on Relational Outcomes. Upon reviewing the extant literature on SA and its influence on marital outcomes, scholars have attempted to explain to what extent causal, selection, or mediation effects best explain why abstaining from sex until marriage is associated with more positive relationship outcomes. Per the findings of early studies, scholars have controlled for a wide range of socioeconomic variables that may confound the relationship between SA and relational outcomes (Waldron et al., 1996). There is a possibility that practicing SA in a relationship has a direct influence on relationship quality (Larson & Holman, 1994; Wilcox, 2008). In order to determine whether a causal relationship exists, one must 1) establish correlation, 2) temporal (or time-related) precedence through longitudinal studies, and c) rule out confounding variables (Field, 2009; Oldham, 2019). Eliminating other confounding variables would require random selection, a methodological challenge, therefore direct effect of SA to marital outcomes is elusive. However, other indirect effects have been considered to explain the link between SA and marital satisfaction and stability.

Indirect Effect of Premarital Sexual History. Edward Laumann and his colleagues suggest that people who acquire a taste for sexual activity at an early age, and who have multiple partners, are less likely “to be sexually exclusive over the remainder of their life, with the result that divorce is a more likely outcome for them” (2000, p. 503). When compared to still married individuals, divorced men and women reported more premarital sexual experiences (Kelly & Conley, 1987). Scholars further explored other indirect effects that could explain the associations which supports an earlier finding that “premarital sex is predictive of extramarital sex, which plays a prominent role in disrupting marriages” (Newcomb & Bentler,

1981, p. 233). Furthermore, slight differences have been found between men and women. In one study, researchers found that premarital sex had no effect on marital happiness, except for women who had high rates of sex before age 16 (Kelly & Conley, 1987). Another finding was that those who had sex with one's fiancé and other partners were related to lower marital satisfaction and divorce, but for men only (Tavris & Sadd, 1977).

In 2004, Teachman re-evaluated the evidence that suggested that premarital intercourse was associated with an increased risk of marital disruption; he tested whether premarital sex altered the attitudes toward and expectations about marriage. Additionally, Teachman (2004) considered the linkages among premarital cohabitation, premarital intercourse and marital dissolution, simultaneously, and included both sexual and cohabitation history in his survey analyses of 6,577 women aged 15 – 45 who had a mean age at marriage of 22. Two variables were created. One was a dichotomous variable, whether the woman ever had sex prior to her first marriage. The second variable had three categories: women who did not have sex before marriage, women who had premarital sex but limited to their husbands, and women who had premarital sex with their husbands and at least one other man. The same procedure was taken to create the cohabitation variables. The results of Teachman's (2004) study revealed that when using the dichotomous variable of premarital sex, women who had their first sexual encounter prior to first marriage were 34% more likely to experience marital dissolution. When relationship history was accounted for, there was no longer a significant effect. Women whose first sex was with someone other than her husband experienced an increased risk of marital disruption (114%). Teachman further concluded that should shift attention away from research that focuses on the selection of individuals who choose to

engage in premarital sexual activity, and focus on the selection of individuals who do not marry the individuals with whom they first initiate first sex. His assertion implied a difference between people who form multiple relationships and people who form a single, longer lasting relationship (Teachman, 2004). I will now segue into to a body of literature that explores

Indirect or “Selection” Effect of Religion. Several studies have implied that religion may have a direct effect on SA given the religious sanctions around what behaviors are appropriate, and behaviors that are not. In this case, religion will have an indirect effect on the practice of SA and marital outcomes. Considering that all religious people do not adhere to these mandates (Cross-Barnet & McDonald, 2015; Rostosky et al., 2004; Wilcox, 2008), scholars have implied that the influence of religion is indirect, as in the actions or behaviors that individuals engage in, indirectly influence SA or avoidance of premarital sex, activities such as going to church, where SA is reinforced, “joiners” who like to be involved in church actives such as sports and ministry, or, mechanisms that are usually unmeasured that aid in a desirable outcome, in this case, SA until marriage (Regnerus & Smith, 2005).

Other scholars have noted that it may be the personality trait that attributes to the link between SA and marital outcomes and not religion at all (Wilcox, 2008). For instance, one study explores whether it is the values about SA that mediates SA and marital outcomes (Hardy & Willoughby, 2017). These scholars found that among married adults, religiosity positively predicted both chastity values (i.e., the importance of waiting until marriage to have sex and importance of sex within marriage as a bonding experience), while, in turn, chastity values were positively linked to sexual frequency and sexual satisfaction. Some researcher have found that more frequent religious attendance and practice are correlated with practicing more

relationship maintenance behaviors and higher marital satisfaction and stability (Call & Heaton, 1997; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2008).

Another angle at which selection effects of religion has been considered is that some individuals are goal oriented in nature and use religion as a strategy to attain their goals. As Regnerus & Smith described, “people who are already predisposed toward certain outcomes (e.g., staying married, remaining healthy and active, retaining virginity) may instrumentally choose to become religiously involved as one strategy toward achieving that end” (p. 26). Nonetheless, scholars have repeatedly emphasized that religion has a pivotal influence in sexual behavior and further investigation on the nuances that religion in SA and marital outcomes warrants continued investigation (Regnerus & Smith, 2005).

Indirect Effects of Sexual Timing and Relationship Processes. Scholars have examined if the timing of sex in a relationship has short- or long-term benefits in dating relationships and marriage (Busby et al., 2010; Oldham, 2019; Peplau et al., 1977; Willoughby, 2014). Although the literature on sexual timing is extensive, there were only four studies that included SA in their comparison groups. These studies aimed to explore the relationship of sexual timing on relationship processes, quality and outcomes among unmarried couples whose trajectory may or may not have included marriage (Oldham, 2019; Peplau et al., 1977; Willoughby, 2014).

Peplau and colleagues (1977) were the first to examine links between the timing of sexual initiation and the development of emotional intimacy in dating relationships. They utilized a dyadic approach in their study of 231 college-aged couples, identifying three couple patterns of sexual timing in dating relationships: a) early sex couples, who had sexual intercourse prior to dating or within a month of their first date; b) later sex couples, who had

sex one month or later after they started dating; and c) abstaining couples, who were abstaining from sexual intercourse until they were married. They also considered the couple's orientation towards sex (i.e. traditional or liberal) and the order in which they perceived emotional intimacy. Their findings indicate that among the subset of the sample who were interviewed at wave 1, abstaining couples were more likely to have traditional views and hold that premarital sex was morally wrong, less likely to be in a serious relationship and expressed that emotional intimacy develops in the context of limited sexual activity when compared to early sex and later sex couples. Surprisingly their findings revealed that there were no differences in relationship satisfaction and stability at two year follow up. This study was significant given that it was the first to operationalize abstinence within a dyad (Peplau et al., 1977).

As time progressed, more sophisticated strategies have been employed to move from mere associations of SA and relationship and marital outcomes to correlations, inferring a direction in observed relationship. Additionally, Busby et al. (2010) incorporated other relational processes into their model, specifically examining sex quality, relationship communication, relationship satisfaction, and perceived stability. They surveyed 2,035 married individuals, asking how soon they became sexually active with their spouse and how this timing was related to the aforementioned outcomes. Busby et al. diverged from comparing non-virgin to virgin brides, and instead formed three groups, married couples who had sex early in their relationship (before they started dating to one month after), later in their relationship (one month to two years after dating) and those who were sexual with their partners after marriage (i.e., abstinent, Peplau et al., 1977). Their findings revealed that couples in both the later sex

and married sex groups were significantly different than the early sex group. Explicitly, the longer participants waited to be sexual the more stable and satisfying their relationships were after marriage. Furthermore, participants who waited to be sexual until after marriage had significantly higher levels of communication and sexual quality compared to the other two groups (Busby et al., 2010). What is important about this study is that the associations remained significant after including control variables that had been linked with both the timing of sex and at least one relationship outcome (i.e., relationship length, race, education, income, and parents' divorce; and the more common controls noted above, number of sexual partners and religiosity).

In a third study, Willoughby et al. (2014) used a sample of 10,932 unmarried individuals in their examination of how sexual timing was associated with the relationship processes, communication, satisfaction, and perceived stability. His groupings differed slightly by further carving out Peplau's early sex group into a pre-dating group, those who had sex prior to dating, and early sex, those who had sex within a few weeks after, forming four instead of three sexual timing groups. Delayed sex and no sex (abstaining) were consistent with the earlier study. Willoughby's (2014) findings replicate and expand upon previous work that early sexual initiation in a relationship may have negative short- and long-term consequences for relationship development, even after controlling for past sexual history (Busby et al., 2010), and further suggests that assessments of this nature should be considered a coupling process, not individual. Willoughby and colleagues (2014) suggest important new information, that those who pursue sexual initiation in premarital relationships may experience relationship erosion outcomes earlier than those couples who abstain from sexual activity.

Recently, Oldham (2019) recruited individuals in premarital relationships ($N=80$), who had not yet had sex with their current partner, to explore whether there was an association between when individuals first had sex with a new romantic partner and how satisfied and stable that relationship was using five waves of online survey data collected over three months. The distinct groupings in this study slightly differed from the previous two studies noted above, by grouping abstaining couples in both the delayed-sex relationship group, and a category called new relationships. Delayed sex relationships consisted of couples who were highly intimate and serious about one another but either had not had sex yet (86% of this group) or waited until reaching these levels of intimacy and seriousness before having sex during the time of the study (14% of the delayed group). The new relationship groups consisted of couples who also did not have sex during the course of the study, but were in fairly new relationships, consisting of “talking,” casually dating, or had broken up in their last wave of participation.

In summary, there is a possibility that practicing SA in a relationship influences relationship quality. To determine whether this causal relationship exists, one must 1) establish correlation, 2) temporal precedence through longitudinal studies, and c) rule out confounding variables (Field, 2009). Recent studies have provided support for the criterion of correlation (e.g., Busby et al., 2010; Willoughby et al., 2014), with studies finding that SA is associated with positive relationship outcomes, in terms of relationship processes, marital satisfaction and stability, even when controlling for common confounding variables (i.e., timing, sexual history and religion). Regarding temporal precedence, both Peplau et al.'s (1977) and Oldham's (2019) study used longitudinal data (a two-year follow-up; and a three-month follow up respectively), to assess whether sex-timing predicted later relationship satisfaction and stability but neither

found support for longitudinal effects. Therefore, temporal precedence is inconclusive, and so is direct relationship between SA and marital outcomes.

For the purposes of the present study, researchers in the area of sexual timing and relationship outcomes who control for past sexual history, indicate that delaying sexual activity with a partner is associated with having better relationship quality among both dating and married couples (Busby et al., 2010; Willoughby et al., 2014). Additionally, scholars have communicated religion's influence on later marital outcomes and highlighted direct, indirect, and selection effects (Hardy & Willoughby, 2017; Regnerus & Smith, 2005). Despite the gains in the SA literature, there appears to be an opportunity to advance research by exploring the heterogeneity among abstaining couples, and in a group that is underrepresented in the literature – African Americans. Additional important gaps warrant further investigation, and I outline these areas next.

Gaps in the Literature

In review, the process of abstaining from sex until marriage has positive effects on individuals and couples (Burgess & Wallin, 1953; Busby et al., 2010; Finger et al., 2004; Janus & Janus, 1993; Kahn & London, 1991; Kelly & Conley, 1987; Laumann et al., 2000; Newcomb & Bentler, 1981; Oldham, 2019; Peplau et al., 1977; Tavis & Sadd, 1977; Teachman, 2004; Willoughby et al., 2014). However these findings are based on few studies in adulthood with little to no attention to African Americans, lived experiences, or relationship processes. The next sections elaborate on the need for clarity, conceptualization and fulfillment of five specific gaps found in the SA literature.

SA as a Lived Experience

The empirical studies that have shown positive associations of SA until marriage with relationship satisfaction and later relationship and marital sustainability were based primarily on secondary data from large nationally represented data sets. Scholars, using quantitative data and primarily White samples, showed associations, but lacked attention to lived experiences (Austin & Sutton, 2014; Ratner, 2008). This is the basis of the present study.

SA Redefined

To begin to advance the literature on SA, a necessary first step is to have a clear definition of what SA is. Scholars have reported conflicting terminology (e.g., virginity, abstinence, celibacy, inexperienced) and have been inconsistent in which specific behaviors constituted “breaking” one’s abstinence. For instance, in one of the few studies examining young adults who received abstinence-only education or took a virginity pledge as an adolescent, authors defined abstinence as never having penile-vaginal intercourse (Bersamin et al., 2005; Landor & Simons, 2014). Young adults who took the pledge to abstain from sex were less likely to have had sexual intercourse; yet they were as equally likely to have had oral and/or anal sex (Bersamin et al., 2005; Landor & Simons, 2014). Additionally, in the review of the retreat from sex among young adults today, researchers have attributed masturbation and non-coital “hooking up” behaviors as contributors to the decline in sex among young adults. Scholars who aimed to identify adults engaging in “less sex” appeared to include any behavior outside of coital sex, as the absence of sex (Julian, 2018; Shepherd et al., 2017). Again, clarity is needed, in terms of what behaviors constitute SA, and what behaviors do not, a requisite this study aims to provide by allowing participants to offer key components of a SA definition.

SA after Sexual Debut

Another gap in the literature is the notion of “saving” sex for marriage after having engaged in a sexually active past, a practice that some scholars have termed *secondary abstinence* (Loewenson et al., 2004; Rasberry & Goodson, 2009; Thomas, 2000). Historically, scholars have defined SA as never having had intercourse, referring to these individuals as “virgins” or “maintaining one’s virginity” (Haase et al., 2012; Ott et al., 2006;).

By deciding to wait for sex until marriage, and thereby restricting the courtship process, adults may set in motion certain family processes that influence relationship maintenance, happiness, longevity and other marital outcomes (Burton & Jayakody, 2001; Stanley, Rhoades & Markman, 2006; Stanley & Rhoades, 2009). Although we have some understanding of their underlying motivations, social scientists still know very little about the lived experiences of adults who decide to abstain from sex until marriage, or the relationship processes that take place while abstaining. Gaining a detailed and explicit understanding from those who abstained from sex until marriage, and how SA is defined in terms of allowable behavior and sexual history, would be very beneficial to researchers who study sexual timing, decision-making, and relationship sequencing, adding significant value to the existing body of research on relationship processes and lived experiences among African American couples.

Significance

This review exposes a need for more research on SA. In general, this study fills a void in the extant literature by providing a rich description of the lived experience of individuals and couples who practice abstinence before marriage (for at least six months), the necessity to redefine SA in terms of permissible behaviors, and to extend the research on SA after sexual

debut, including heterogeneity in the sexual histories of those who choose this courtship behavior. This study sample does not include couples who abstained from premarital sex for less than six months prior to marriage, or couples who had no intentions of having a period of abstention, therefore, no direct comparisons can be made. . However, in this research, I explore whether the subsequent relationship processes that conceptual models such as sliding versus deciding and relationship transitions, which have been revealed to be advantageous, also applies to a group that have known disparities in relationships and marital outcomes, in general, and are underrepresented in the SA literature – African Americans.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented a background on the marital trends in the United States and Black marriage that informs this study. I discussed current initiatives that focus on identifying factors that lead to quality marriages among African American couples, including the significance of religion on African American marriage. Although marital trends have transformed for all racial groups, in terms of premarital sexual behaviors and cohabitation they have been most significant for this population. I make the case that transformational change does not include all couples, and not much attention has been given to the smaller group, those who practice SA until marriage. In review of the literature on SA and its influence on adults, relationships and marriage, there have been positive inferences made, yet this phenomenon is understudied in terms of methods used, and an in-depth understanding of the lived experience of those who choose this behavior. I introduced sexual constraint theory and “sliding versus deciding,” theoretical and conceptual frameworks that help to guide this study. The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of African Americans who chose the understudied

phenomena of abstaining from sex until marriage for at least six months, and has the potential to make a contribution to the existing relationship science literature and will be of value to other scholars.

Chapter 3 is a discussion of the methodology used to address the research question and sub-questions for the present study. Elements of the research procedures, including the selection of participants, description of the sample, data inquiry and collection, organization, and analyses of the data and trustworthiness, are detailed.

CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

Overview

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the research methodology for this phenomenological study regarding the lived experiences of African American couples who abstained from sex until marriage for at least six months prior to marriage. It further expands on the following areas: (a) rationale for research approach; (b) description of the research sample; (c) summary of the information needed; (d) an overview of research design; (e) methods of data collection; (f) a preliminary analyses and data synthesis plan; (g) ethical considerations; (h), issues of worthiness; and (i) delimitations to the study. The chapter culminates with a brief closing summary.

Rationale for Qualitative Research Design

Qualitative research is an umbrella term for a wide variety of approaches and methods used to study natural social life (Saldaña , 2011). This mode of research is mostly grounded in a constructivist philosophical position, with its general concern with how the complexities of the sociocultural world are experienced, interpreted, and understood, in a particular context and point in time (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). The intent of qualitative research is to examine a social situation or interaction by allowing the researcher to enter the world of others, an attempt to achieve a holistic rather than a reductionist understanding (Maxwell, 2013). Whereas reductionism breaks a process down into static parts, the holistic paradigm focuses on maintaining whole processes (Ratner, 2008). The holistic perspective is fundamentally concerned with how things change through the process that acts on them. Furthermore, qualitative research extends this concept and attempts to explore and clarify the thoughts and

feelings of study participants, and to interpret participants' experiences of the phenomena of interest, with an aim to find explanations for human behavior in any given context (Austin & Sutton, 2014; Ratner, 2008). The extant literature on remaining sexually abstinent until marriage, thus far, has involved studies with quantitative methods (Burgess & Wallin, 1953; Busby et al., 2010; Finger et al., 2004; Janus & Janus, 1993; Kahn & London, 1991; Kelly & Conley, 1987; Laumann et al., 2000; Newcomb & Bentler, 1981; Oldham, 2019; Peplau et al., 1977; Stanley and Rhoades, 2009; Stanley, Rhoades, et al., 2006; Tavis & Sadd, 1977; Teachman, 2004; Willoughby et al., 2014). Studies that utilize quantitative methods evaluate associations, rather than explore processes.

The primary aim of this phenomenological study is to explore the lived experiences and relationship processes of a sample of African American couples who abstained from sex until marriage for at least six months. The features of a qualitative method allow for an inductive approach, which is warranted given the embryonic stage of the literature and the need to explore the lived experiences and processes associated with the decision to wait for sex until marriage. Furthermore, a qualitative method aims to: (a) understand the processes by which decisions, events, and actions take place; (b) develop a deeper understanding of these definitions and processes; (c) facilitate interaction between researcher and participant; (d) adopt an exploratory stance; and (e) maintain flexibility throughout the study design, all components that fit well with the current aim of this study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016; Moustakas, 1994; Saldaña, 2011).

Rationale for Phenomenological Methodology

As a subsequent step to choosing a qualitative method, I considered various approaches and genres of qualitative research to determine which qualitative tradition aligned best with the intention of the present study. One of interest is phenomenology. Teherani et al. (2015) define[d] this form of qualitative study as “an approach to research that seeks to describe the essence of a phenomenon by exploring it from the perspective of those who have experienced it” (p. 670). The purpose of phenomenological research is to investigate the meaning of the lived experience of people and to identify the essence of human experience or phenomena, as described by the research participants themselves. Some conceive this form of qualitative inquiry as a philosophy, given that the intention is not to develop a theory to explain someone’s experience, instead, the aim is to facilitate a more in-depth understanding, to synthesize the commonalities of participants’ collective experiences, and their perceptions of the phenomenon of interest (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016; Moustakas, 1994; Saldaña, 2011).

One of two leading figures of the phenomenological movement were the philosophical perspectives of Husserl (1859-1938) and Heidegger (1889-1976), with their versions influencing most philosophers that followed. Their description of phenomenological research involved studying a small number of subjects through extensive and prolonged engagement to develop patterns and relationships of meaning (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016; Moustakas, 1994). According to Husserl, pure phenomenological research seeks primarily to describe rather than to explain, and to start from a perspective free from hypotheses or preconceptions (Husserl, 1970; van Manen, 1990).

Due to the embryonic stage of the literature on SA, it is essential to employ a tradition that provides the most abundant and descriptive data, when aiming to reveal lived experiences and understand relationship processes. The consensus is that phenomenology, as compared to the other qualitative traditions and genres, is the ideal approach for eliciting and deriving commonalities in the participants' lived experiences and developing a deeper understanding about the features of a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Further employing the Husserlian framework, phenomenology is a methodological space within social science that provides researchers the ability to study human phenomena at a deeper level of their own consciousness, in order to understand the lived experiences of others. Husserl (1970) also suggested applying a heuristic principle of being faithful to the phenomena as it appeared to be, at the experiential level, describing whatever it manifests itself to the participant's consciousness. These principles have further evolved into a brand of phenomenology called descriptive phenomenology, with an aim for the researcher to describe the essence of the participants' experience, without explaining or analyzing, all while setting aside or "bracketing" their own preconceived opinions of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Husserl, 1970; Moustakas, 1994; Reiners, 2012; van Manen, 1990).

Absent from the literature is the mere essence of the lived experiences of people who engaged in this premarital behavior. Utilizing phenomenology as both a philosophy and as a research method, and further following a descriptive approach to describe participants' lived experiences, was used to illuminate an inadequately understood aspect of SA before marriage. It is my goal as a researcher to uphold the standards set forth by the predecessors of qualitative

inquiry, and identify SA until marriage as an “object” of human experience and give it a voice, provided by those who have experienced it (Husserl, 1970; Sloan & Bowe, 2014).

As briefly mentioned above, bracketing, or the concept of “*epoche*,” is a method of phenomenological inquiry that requires deliberately putting aside one’s own belief about the phenomenon under investigation prior to and throughout the phenomenological investigation (Carpenter, 2007; Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1990). Bracketing also serves as a means of demonstrating the validity of the data collection and analyses process (Ahern, 1999). Therefore, researchers advise that there should be substantial effort made on the part of the researcher, to put aside their repertoires of knowledge, beliefs, values, and experiences in order to first understand, and later describe the participants’ experiences (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016; Chan et al., 2013; Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1990).

Chan et al. (2013) further suggested that the concept of bracketing should be in the researcher’s mind throughout the research process, and not merely restricted to the data collection and analyses phases. They propose researchers start bracketing even before the literature review since the literature review, data collection, and analyses are interrelated.

Reflecting on the Chan et al. (2013) article, there were questions that the researchers included to assist in the bracketing process (pp. 4 – 5). I have used these questions to bracket my knowledge learned through disciplinary training and personal and professional experience, on a phenomenon that I value:

- “Am I humble enough to learn about the experiences of other married couples who abstained from sex until marriage?” – Yes.

- “Can I equip myself to adopt an attitude of conscious ignorance about the issue under investigation?” – Yes.
- Could I ask myself, “what sorts of new information might be generated after the research” without answering the question readily? – Yes.
- “Do I understand the topic enough that I can justify the research study while maintaining my curiosity in this area?” – Yes.

Other strategies to bracketing can be employed during the data collection and analyses phases and are further discussed in the sections below.

Role of Researcher

As to my role as the researcher, it is noteworthy that I am an African American woman with a consistent and imbedded interest in dyadic interactions, relevant processes within romantic and dating relationships, and the discovery of facilitators of the formation and maintenance of marriage among African Americans. My research interests originated when I was a young, unmarried mother of two in my mid-twenties with a strong desire for marriage. Upon entering graduate school, my goal was to know more about the underlying mechanisms that explain dissatisfaction, termination, disappointment, and doubt in relationships. Many of my family members and friends shared similar sentiments; this was quite common within my network and community.

My search for deeper understanding continued for the past 17 years, emerging from an extensive literature review in requirements for my Master of Arts degree in psychology, investments in private relationship education programs, the reading of numerous books and articles, and actively seeking out leading experts and researchers in relationship science to

validate the data, strategies and techniques obtained through these endeavors. After nearly a decade of obtaining knowledge and implementing novel processes and techniques learned along the way, it is my belief that significant change in my dating relationships (in terms of quality and satisfaction) did not materialize until I made one significant decision: to abstain from sex until marriage. That decision, in combination with other acquired knowledge and skills, allowed for an alignment of my dating behaviors with my Christian beliefs, and afforded a new sense of confidence, faith, and intention while romantically dating. This period is what I attributed to the courtship and later marriage to my now husband. Therefore, it is imperative to identify and reflect on my position, now serving as a researcher in an area of which I personally experienced the phenomenon under study.

Merton (1972) placed the role of the researcher in social sciences and qualitative research as either an “insider” or an “outsider,” – one who shares certain characteristics with their subjects or one who does not, such as, race and/or gender, among other categories. An “insider” may have shared knowledge with study subjects, both allowing them to understand certain cultural terminologies or unspoken truths, but at the same time limiting them by allowing for those “unspoken” truths or general understandings that risk becoming part of the research record. In the present study, I had the position of an insider considering my past experience with SA until marriage. This factor places me at some level of advantage to deeply understand the lived experience that I am trying to explore. Bentz and Shapiro (1998) wrote that:

The researcher approaches social reality not as a visitor from Mars or a disinterested insider but as an engaged member of society, who as such has a vested interest in social

conditions and the solution of social problems...the person's study of society...always has some social agenda built into it...knowledge is never socially neutral but always plays some role in a specific society of culture (p. 149-50).

Nevertheless, it is the insider position that makes me vulnerable to bias. I had to make a conscious effort to bracket my own perceptions about SA. My experience may have been different from the lived experiences of my participants. In this study, the participants are the experts in sharing their lived experiences. My role is to document and voice their experiences. As an emerging scholar, I am quite eager to learn and explore the lived experiences of others in order to understand the how these experiences and relationship processes unfold.

The Research Sample

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore the lived experiences and relationship processes of a sample of African American couples who abstained from sex for at least six months prior to marriage. Phenomenology uses criterion-based sampling, in which participants meet predefined criteria. The most prominent criterion is the participant's experience with the phenomenon under study (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Therefore, the criteria for selecting participants were as follows:

1. Being currently married and living with their spouse.
2. Both spouses identifying as African American and agreeing to participate.
3. Having abstained from sex for at least six months before marrying their current spouse.

There are three reasons why these specific criteria were set for this study. First, due to its aim in understanding how SA influences relationship and marital processes, it was essential

to interview participants who were currently married, and not separated from their spouse, in order to capture the essence of this phenomenon. As other researchers have implied, measuring relationship processes among married couples who were legally separated or separated due to employment or military duty, for example, had the potential to bring in confounding factors that were outside the scope of this study (Stanley et al., 2014).

Second, I decided to capitalize on using a within-group design and set an inclusion criterion of being African Americans. As Phinney and Landin (1998) asserted, “within-group designs have several advantages: (a) it allows the researcher to study a group on its own terms as opposed to looking at things in terms of similarities and differences to other groups; (b) the researcher can identify and describe possible issues that are uniquely important to that group; or (c) explore topics relevant to the group that were previously ignored” (p. 91). Additional studies on interracial couples that were comprised of a Black and non-Black spouse revealed that these couples experienced unique challenges known to influence marital quality and satisfaction, factors that could potentially confound the influence of SA (Banks, 2012; Bryant & Duncan, 2019; Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1990). Thus, I set the criteria that both spouses must have identified as African American.

Finally, the eligibility criteria required couples to abstain from sex for at least six months prior to marriage. Researchers who have explored the effects of sexual timing on relationship outcomes caution that brevity within any given relationship is not indicative of the overall development of that relationship. Oldham (2019) reported that three months was inadequate to unveil relationship processes or probable change when evaluating couples who were practicing SA. Willoughby et al. (2014) reported an increase in the effects in relationship

outcomes of abstinent couples as relationship length increased. Additionally, scholars have noted that couples who reported abstaining from sex until marriage could have done so after sexual debut (Busby et al., 2010; Peplau et al., 1977; Willoughby et al. 2014). Therefore, the requirement of at least a six-month sustained abstinence period, which included couples who may have abstained for longer periods, or their entire dating period, may help ensure that couples spend ample time experiencing the phenomena to evaluate their lived experiences and relationship processes.

Recruitment and Sampling Strategy

Considering that this phenomenon of abstaining from sex until marriage is not common according to literature, the added conditions, although pivotal to the aim of this study, reduced the likelihood of finding participants who met the study's criteria. Therefore, criterion-based sampling, along with the traditional snowball technique was employed as the primary means of recruitment.

Email to Religious Leaders. Given that SA before marriage is a common religious mandate, I began recruitment efforts by first contacting religious organizations who were known to have a congregation that is predominantly African American. I first contacted individuals and organizations known to me, as well as used referrals from trusted contacts. For organizations without a known contact or referral, I made contact by way of email or phone call, targeting premarital counseling or preparatory programs and marriage ministries, programs that may have had current or past participation from couples who may have fit the criteria. The following requests were made of each contact at the organization: (1) their participation in the present study, if applicable; (2) referral of this study to persons known to

them who may fit the criteria; and lastly, (3) to distribute details of the study to their email listservs or make an announcements during their worship service.

Sample Size. To determine the goal sample size of this phenomenological study, several reliable sources were reviewed. Creswell (2013) suggested collecting extensive details about a few individuals, noting three to 10 cases. Estabrooks et al. (1994) also provided suggestions, declaring that “to understand the essence of an experience, as with phenomenological approach, six participants is recommended.” Guetterman (2015) analyzed 11 phenomenological studies, noting a mean sample size of 21 participants at a single site, which exceeded the recommendations noted above. He discussed a possible explanation highlighting the length that most recommendations originated (e.g., Estabrooks et al., 1994) or perhaps the increase in sample sizes that had occurred along with the growth of qualitative research. All considered, the present study aimed for 10 married couples, with a total of 20 participants.

Sample Description

This section provides an introduction to the lives of ten African American couples who abstained from sex for at least six months prior to marriage. I will begin by describing the sample from the data derived using a demographic questionnaire that each participant completed prior to their interview. Demographic information is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Sociodemographic Characteristics, by Sample (N=20)

Characteristic	<i>n</i>	%
Marital status		
First marriage ^a	19	95.0
Children ^a	17	85.0
Religiosity		

Table 1. *Continued*

Characteristic	<i>n</i>	%
Religion affiliation*		
Christian	17	85.0
Pentecostal	2	10.0
Baptist	1	5.0
Importance of religion		
Extremely important	7	35.0
Very important	3	15.0
Church attendance		
2-6 times a week	4	20.0
Once a week	15	75.0
Never	1	5.0
Education		
Graduate or advanced degree	8	40.0
Some college, but no degree	6	30.0
Bachelor's degree	5	25.0
High school diploma or equivalent	1	5.0
Employment		
Self-employed/entrepreneur	5	25.0
Employed, working 40 hours per week	11	55.0
Employed, working >40 hours per week	1	5.0
Not employed, not looking for work	2	10.0
Retired	1	5.0
Income (personal)		
Less than \$29,999	5	25.0
\$30,000 - \$59,999	4	20.0
\$60,000 - \$99,999	9	45.0
More than \$100,000	2	10.0

To summarize, the sample consisted of middle-aged adults, age ranging from 29 and 82, with an average age of 38.8. All participants were affiliated with a religion, mostly Christian (85%); ten referred to religion being extremely important to them and 19 attended church services at least once a week, either online or in person. The sample was also well-educated with the majority having attained a college degree (40% graduate level, 25% with bachelors). They were also gainfully employed with most working 40 hours a week, with an average annual individual income range of \$50-\$60K and household income of \$100K or more, which is considered

middle class. Nineteen participants reported that this was their first marriage, with one reporting a third marriage. Seven couples had biological children born within their union, with most children (92%) being under the age of five. One individual reported having three adult children from his two previous marriages, but none with his current spouse. In terms of their dating and abstinence period, the respondents abstained from sex until marriage for an average of 4.3 years, much more time than the eligibility criteria indicated.

Sexual History of Individual Participants

Participants were asked about their sexual history prior to abstinence with their spouse. Participants reported the age at first penetrative sex, number of sexual partners prior to marriage, and whether or not this sexual experience included their current spouse. This information is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Sexual History, by Sample (N=20)

Characteristic	Total				Males				Females			
	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Range</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Range</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Range</i>
Response to	20				10				10			
“Had premarital sex?”												
No (Virgin)	8				3				5			
Yes, not with spouse	8				5				3			
(Non-virgin)												
Yes, with spouse	4				2				2			
(Non-virgin ⁺)												
Age at first penile-vaginal intercourse	20	24.0	8.0	13-42	10	22.2	6.5	15-34	10	25.7	9.4	13- 2
Virgins	8	32.4	5.0	27-42	3	30.3	3.5	27-34	5	33.6	5.8	27-42
Non-virgins	8	18.9	3.5	13-25	5	20.0	3.3	17-25	3	17.0	3.5	13-19
Non-virgins ⁺	4	17.3	17.0	15-20	2	15.5	0.7	15-16	2	19.0	1.4	18-20
Developmental age at first intercourse (Non-virgins)	12				7				5			
Prior to age 18	5				4				1			
18 and over	7				3				4			

Table 2. *Continued*

Characteristic	Total				Males				Females			
Number of premarital sexual partners (Non-virgins)	12	10.8	13.3	1-50	7	15.0	15.5	1-50	5	6.9	5.8	1-15
Non-Virgins	8	12.4	16.7	1-50	5	16.4	20.1	1-50	3	5.7	8.1	1-15
Non-Virgins ⁺	4	7.8	6.0	3-16	2	11.5	6.4	7-16	2	4.0	1.4	3-5

⁺Participants with a sexual history that includes current spouse

What emerged from the sexual history data, was the need to categorize the participants into separate groups. First, participants with no reported sexual history was separated from those with a sexual past. This created binary groups:

- 1) Virgins: those who had never had sexual intercourse
- 2) Non-Virgins (NonV): those who were sexually abstinent prior to marriage, with no sexual history with current spouse.

As indicated in , there were four individuals (two couples) who reported sexual history, which included their spouse, thus forming the third category of abstainers.

- 3) Non-Virgins⁺ (NonV⁺): those who reported being previously romantically involved with their spouse, but after reconciling and reuniting, there was no sexual activity within the six months prior to getting married.

Data pertaining to their SA and relationship history with their current spouse was used to inform the findings related to SA.

Abstinence and Relationship History of Participants, by Couple

Table 3 presents the additional demographic data obtained. Specifically, it introduces the pseudonyms, genders, ages, and sexual histories of the couple by SA Group (i.e., Non-Virgin, Virgin), their period of SA partnered, and cohabitation prior to marriage, number of years married and number of children with current spouse.

Table 3. Sexual Abstinence, Relationship and Marital History of Participants, by Couple

Couple number	Participant pseudonym	Gender	Age	SA group	Years abstinent	Cohabit	Years married	# of Children
1	Freeman	M	43	Non-Virgin	1	No	1	1
	Renae	F	38	Virgin				
2	Nathaniel	M	31	Non-Virgin	8	No	4	1
	Aaliyah	F	31	Non-Virgin				
3	Roderick	M	34	Non-Virgin	2	No	5	4
	Savannah	F	29	Non-Virgin				
4	Avery	M	33	Virgin	12	Yes	5	1
	Lisa	F	33	Virgin				
5	Anthony	M	34	Non-Virgin	1	No	4	2
	Mia	F	40	Non-Virgin				
6	Warren	M	36	Non-Virgin ⁺	2	No	4	0
	Destiny	F	35	Non-Virgin ⁺				
7	Moses	M	82	Non-Virgin	0.5	No	12	0
	Denise	F	55	Virgin				
8	Jacob	M	36	Virgin	4	Yes	10	1
	Addison	F	33	Virgin				
9	Demetrius	M	45	Non-Virgin ⁺	2	No	17	2
	Tracy	F	45	Non-Virgin ⁺				
10	Ramon	M	31	Virgin	10	No	2	0
	Andrea	F	32	Virgin				

⁺Participants with a sexual history that includes current spouse

Research Design

Overview

The following outlines the steps I have and will later utilize to carry out the present study. More detailed information on each step is provided in the sections that follow.

1. Preceding the collection of data, a comprehensive literature review was conducted to study the contributions of other researchers and writers in the broad areas of African American marriage, marriage initiatives and programming, SA and its effect on relationships and marriage, and premarital sex and its effects on African American relationships and marriage.

2. Following the proposal defense, I acquired the approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to proceed with the present study. The IRB approval process involved outlining all procedures and processes needed to ensure adherence to standards put forth for the study of human subjects, including participants' confidentiality and informed consent.
3. A combined sample strategy consisting of criterion and snowballing techniques was utilized to recruit participants.
4. Potential participants were contacted by email and were asked to complete a brief demographic questionnaire upon acknowledgment that they met the criteria of inclusion.
5. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with 20 individuals, 10 couples, located across the United States.
6. Interview data responses were analyzed within and between groups of interviewees, as well as within and between dyadic couple interviews.

Literature Review

I reviewed empirical literature, along with books, reports and targeted literature from the popular press, to inform this study. Three topics emerged: (a) US marital trends, transformative change of cohabitation and premarital sex; (b) the de-institutionalization of African American marriage, and current marriage initiatives; (c) SA, and its influence on relationships and marriage, along with conceptual frameworks that helped explain these effects.

IRB Approval

Following the literature review, I developed a formal proposal for the present study that included the background/context, problem statement, purpose statement, and research questions outlined in Chapter 1; the literature review in Chapter 2; and the proposed methodological approach as outlined here in Chapter 3. Upon approval of the proposal, I sought clearance from the IRB to carry out this research effort.

Data Collection Methods

Once a potential participant came to the study, an online form was made available to outline the purpose of the study and the criteria to participate. They were then directed to a page with a pre-screening questionnaire to confirm their eligibility (by way of selecting checkboxes) and asked to read and provide their signed informed consent (electronic signature). Once an electronic informed consent was obtained, the participant was directed to a page to collect their preliminary profile data that included their contact information (name, email, phone), demographic information (date of birth, income, educational level), and information about their spouse (name and best form of contact). These forms appear in the Appendices. Upon completing the pre-screening form, informed consent, profile and demographic data, the participant was contacted via email to move forward with the scheduling of their virtual semi-structured interviews.

Unexpectedly, more than the expected ten couples enrolled. Once I scheduled the interview for the tenth couple, I was advised by my dissertation chair to 1) modify my IRB application to increase the maximum number of enrollees from 20 to a larger number; 2) notify the couples who were enrolled that I opted to suspend data collection to focus on completing

my dissertation work and graduate program, and would resume at a future time; 3) ask enrollees to provide an additional contact in the event I was unable to reach them once the study resumed. This resulted in ten additional couples enrolled for the study who were interested in participating, should another round of data collection ensue.

Interviews. Describing the essence of the experience of a phenomenon was the primary aim of this study. Therefore, the main form of data collection was semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The interview method was the most useful due to the ability to elicit rich, thick descriptions of a phenomenon and the potential to capture a person's perspective of their lived experience within it (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016; Creswell, 2013). The interview was also a valuable way of gaining insight on actions and events that took place in the past, which was required for this study (Maxwell, 2013).

The recruitment strategy required participation by both spouses and data collection included both individual and dyadic interviews. Scholars recommend using both separate and joint interviews with the same participants when a) researching a topic that is not too sensitive to endanger participant lives; and b) combining both individual and couple perspectives would result in a broader picture of the phenomenon and may reveal more aspects of "truth" (Brannen, 1988; Eisikovits & Koren, 2010; Taylor & de Vocht, 2011, p. 1587).

There were several advantages of conducting both individual and dyadic interviews (Eisikovits & Koren, 2010; Morris, 2001). Individual interviews allowed each partner to share their experiences from their perspective, without the influence of their partner, and captured the individual within the dyadic unit. Furthermore, dyadic interviews allowed for comparisons, cross-checking, and analyses of the couple's interactions, specifically, nonverbal cues of positive

involvement such as gazes, smiling, touches, closeness and distancing, behaviors known to differentiate satisfied couples from dissatisfied couples (Andersen et al., 2006). Observation of additional nonverbal cues such as raised eyebrows, grins, or frowns, which might signal there was more of the narrative to be explored, or that parts of the narrative were suspect (Eisikovits & Koren, 2010; Morgan et al., 2013; Morris, 2001; Taylor & de Vocht, 2011). A scholar who recently conducted qualitative interviews about African American marriage, in particular, recommended using both parties of the relationship to gain a balance of knowledge from husband and wife instead of obtaining information from solely the wife or the husband (Jackson, 2020).

In terms of sequential order, Wilson et al. (2016) found that when in-depth, couple interviews were conducted after individual interviews, the data extracted from the couple interviews could be used for the purpose of triangulation (i.e., comparing findings from the couple interviews with the individual interviews), complementarity (i.e., seek elaboration, illustration, enhancement, and clarification of the findings from the individual interviews with results from couple interviews), development (i.e., use the results from the couple interviews to help inform findings from the individual interviews), initiation (i.e., discover contradictions that may emerge when findings from the couple interviews and individual interviews are compared that might lead to a re-framing of the emergent theory), and expansion (i.e., expand breadth and range of individual interviews by adding couple interviews). Given that I sought to gain insight into a particular phenomenon and its perceived influence on a relationship and marital processes, the additional components of dyadic data collection and subsequent analyses were

of significant value. More discussion on this is presented in the Data Analyses and Synthesis section below.

Individual interviews ranged from an estimate of 45 minutes to an hour and a half. Couple interviews ranged from one hour to an hour and a half. Although conducting both individual and dyadic interviews have specific strengths, there were various limitations worth noting. First, with any type of interview, not all people were equally cooperative, able to articulate meaning with words, and aware of their experiences. Second, the mere act of interviewing required a certain level of skill and rigor. Lastly, interviews were not neutral tools for data gathering; instead, interviews were comprised of the interaction between the interviewer, the interviewee and the environment in which the interview took place (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Specific to the dyadic interview, changes in the audience (presence of spouse) might influence an individual's version presented separately, and potentially influence the benefits of both the individual and the joint interviews (Shotter, 1995).

Mode of Interview Delivery. Interviewing is the most widely used form of data collection in qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Limitations on time, financial constraints, geographical location, and physical mobility with participants were a few examples of how research populations presented problems for conventional face-to-face interviews (Cater, 2011). Over the last few decades, the technological changes in the growth of the internet have industrialized the experience of on-line interviewing in qualitative inquiry and have reduced these problems related to face-to-face interviews (King et al., 2014; Krouwel, et al. 2019).

For the present study, given the anticipated hard-to-reach population, it was necessary to broaden the reach from participants who were within geographic proximity to me as the researcher, to an audience span within the United States. The web-based video conferencing tool, Zoom, allowed for this broader reach and increased the opportunity of an acceptable size of research participants.

Other advantages to the virtual interview, outside of time and place limitations, were the ability of researcher and participant to interact, build rapport, and for the researcher to pick up on non-verbal cues during, and after, the scheduled interview when using the video component of the web-based services. With Zoom, both audio and video recording were concurrent with a click of a button and did not require the management of separate devices by the researcher. As for the participant, the interview occurred in more convenient locations (home, office, or car) and reduced travel for the participants. There were a few instances where the participant's small children were present for the interview, usually infants. This flexibility reduced initial concerns of reaching key informants and increased chances of participation.

However, it is worth noting that although the virtual video afforded many advantages and closely mirrored the same benefits of an in-person interview, this mode of interview delivery did come with its challenges. With face-to-face interviews, they are usually held in more conducive environments for participants (i.e., public library or a meeting room). For instance, the selection of a disruptive environment (background noise, frequent interruptions from family) could influence the interviewee's concentration and data gathering during an on-line interview (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). In addition to recommending a quiet and distraction-free environment, there would be a necessity for the participant to have high-speed internet

and familiarity with on-line communication and digital literacy (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Janghorban et al., 2014). This presented a problem with a few interviews that were conducted, with the participants oftentimes being interrupted in their dialogue due to a bad internet connection. This caused individuals to have to repeat their thought, which at times was abbreviated from their original narrative shared.

Additionally, virtual interviews had the same ethical concerns as in face-to-face interviews. Researchers obtained informed consent by on-line, email, or posted forms, and all participants were aware of audio or video recordings, which could later be transcribed. The virtual interview still afforded the participant the opportunity to withdraw from the interview process, now with just a click of a button. Researchers have noted that the simplicity of the virtual interview has subsequently increased no shows and rescheduling of interviews compared with face-to-face interactions. However, if this did occur, the added benefit is that time and financial efforts would have not been expended (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). Fortunately, this did not occur during data collection.

A recent study by Krouwel et al. (2019) found that in-person interviews were slightly superior to video calls in terms of presenting more words and statements relative to a similar number of coding, however, the difference was modest. They concluded that ultimately, a mixed mode of interviewing, with some interviews being conducted in-person and some online, may be the most efficient balance; further noting the use of virtual online interviews were justifiable for the potential savings of substantial time and money, or in situations where otherwise the research would not be possible (e.g., federal mandates to prevent an infectious disease, Coronavirus Disease 2019, COVID-19, 2020).

Participant Compensation: Following the interview, each participant received an Amazon e-gift card in the amount of \$50 for their participation. They later received a form via email to complete and sign, that confirmed receipt of compensation via email. All forms were collected by research participants and forwarded to the requesting party from the university.

Data Analyses and Synthesis

To study a given research problem, qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analyses that are both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns or themes (Creswell, 2013, p. 44). It is also recommended to make data analyses and data collection a simultaneous action to avoid the risk of repetitious, unfocused and overwhelming data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Eisikovits and Koren (2010), discuss how they employed dyadic analyses using data from separate interviews, which were later analyzed on both individual and dyadic levels. They explained their ability to derive themes related to the nature of the couple relationships, which were otherwise not seen through other means of analyses: a concept of couplehood and a foundation of collective meaning, which is said to be stronger than mere gender differences (Eisikovits & Koren, 2010).

With the goal of the study being to fully explore and understand the lived experiences of African American couples who abstained from sex until marriage for at least six months prior to marriage, it was beneficial to conduct analyses at both the individual and dyadic levels. I recorded brief, detailed audio notes immediately following each interview, and replayed these notes during the formal analyses phase. Additionally, acknowledging my own role as a researcher, I included measures to enhance the trustworthiness of the data analyses (Chan et

al., 2013). Therefore, the inclusion of dyadic analyses along with the traditional individual descriptive analyses was employed. Data analyses for this study followed a 10-step process:

1. I created a case profile for each couple, which included a recap of each individual interview and their respective dyadic interview.
2. I uploaded all audio files into an online transcription service called Otter. Those transcriptions were later uploaded into MAXQDA, data analytic software, where I further edited the transcribed files, listened to the audio of the individual interviews, and watched the video recording of dyadic interviews. Using this software, I carried out the majority of the data analyses steps that follow.
3. I created clusters to generate meaning and highlighted significant statements, sentences, and quotes.
4. I created categories, one for the main research questions, and one for each of the three research sub-questions.
5. I assigned a descriptor for each category.
6. I assigned a code for each descriptor, using pre-existing theories or conceptual frameworks, as well as themes that were derived from the data.
7. I examined and compared themes and patterns within and across categories.
8. I examined and compared themes and patterns within each couple, assessing for contrast and overlap.
9. I reviewed frequencies and other descriptive statistics from the demographic questionnaire to check for any variables that could account for similarities or differences across couples.

10. I conceptualized how these findings were situated with respect to prior research and compared and contrasted the issues raised in the broader literature.

Ethical Considerations

Understandably, ethical issues related to the protection of research participants were of vital concern, and it was the responsibility of the researcher to both inform and protect those who participated. Although ethical threats were not anticipated to any of the future participants or their well-being, I was diligent and proactive in protecting and safeguarding the rights of the participants. I employed the following measures: (a) established informed consent electronically; (b) considered the rights and interest of the participants when choices were made about reporting and disseminating results; (c) committed to keeping the names and other identifiable information confidential, and; (d) used cautionary measures to secure the storage of research-related records and data in a secured location. Specifically, I immediately uploaded both audio and visual interview files, notes, and other study-related documents to a password-protected, university-controlled, multi-factor authenticated online storage system called CyBox. This ensured that no one had access to the materials other than myself and my dissertation chair.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Credibility and dependability are key aspects in all qualitative work and is particularly vital in qualitative work where the researcher is seen as the instrument. There is concern that a researcher's subjectivity can potentially cloud the interpretation of the data received. Therefore, it is often advised to employ a variety of techniques to ensure the trustworthiness of the research conducted at each stage of the project. Carlson (2010) described trustworthiness

as “how much trust can be given that the researcher did everything possible to ensure that data was appropriately and ethically collected, analyzed, and reported” (p. 1103). Additionally, qualitative research does not focus on the consistency (reliability) or accuracy (validity) of an external measure, but rather focuses on whether the researcher has provided substantial evidence that the descriptions and the analyses of their study represent the reality of the situations and the persons that were studied (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016; Trochim, 2020).

Lincoln and Guba (2000, 2009) adequately explained certain criteria for evaluating the trustworthiness of qualitative research using the terms credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Other scholars have weighed in on how researchers can employ validation strategies to address these four criteria for trustworthiness (Carlson, 2010; Davies & Dodd, 2002; Guba, 1981; Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 2013). The following sections provide a brief description of each set of criteria and the actions that were taken to meet them during the data collection and analyses phases of this present study.

Credibility

This criterion refers to whether the participants’ perceptions of the phenomenon were equivalent to the researcher’s portrayal of them. Put differently, has the researcher accurately represented what the participants thought, felt, and did (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016)? In an attempt to maintain and promote credibility, I employed several recommended procedures both during data collection and after, during data analyses.

Reflexivity. It is noted that qualitative researchers need to “position” themselves in their writings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Malterud (2010) alluded to this requirement noting, “a researcher’s background and position will influence what they choose to investigate, the angle

of investigation, the methods judged adequate for this purpose, the findings considered most appropriate, and the framing and communication of conclusions" (pp. 483-484). Furthermore, Saldaña and Omasta (2016) described researchers as cameras and metaphorically used lenses, filters, and angles to describe the way their attributes can influence researchers' perception of a phenomenon.

A researcher's lens is compared to their demographic characteristics such as gender, age, race, or occupation. Lenses may also influence the particular research methodology or approach to a study. Like with cameras, filters that cover a researcher's lens might consist of personal values, attitudes, and beliefs about the world, formed by their unique personal biography, learned experiences and individual thinking patterns. Cameras are placed at particular angles (panoramic and close-up views) and likewise, this notion of angle speaks to a researcher's positionality, as they are required to zoom in and out throughout qualitative inquiry to get varied perspectives on a given phenomenon. In conclusion, lens, filters, and angles have been used to describe a researcher's tendency to interpret other's experiences based on our own, that our identities as human beings will influence and influence what we observe in others (Saldaña & Omasta, 2016).

Researchers emphasize that a vital characteristic of good qualitative research is to make their "position" explicitly known throughout the study. Following the recommendations of several researchers, I employed the following in terms of reflexivity and positionality throughout the present study. First, I have explicitly outlined my past experience with the phenomenon through my academic endeavors, private pursuits of knowledge, as well as personal and professional experience related to the phenomenon of study (Creswell & Poth,

2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1995). This detailed account is presented in the Role of Researcher section of this dissertation. Secondly, after the interviews were completed, I responded to any inquiries or questions raised about my passion in the exploration of this phenomenon, or those concerning my personal or professional experience; (c) I monitored potential subjective perspectives or predispositions towards me as the researcher by asking specific questions at the start of the interview (e.g. “How did you hear about the study?, What motivated you to participate? What do you know about me?) and recorded relevant notes in a journal throughout the data collection process. This reflective journal aided in the establishment of the audit trail, noted in later discussion; (d) I continued reflective journaling throughout the data analyses process and reporting (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1995).

Triangulation. In qualitative research, triangulation is an approach that uses multiple methods or data sources in qualitative research to develop a comprehensive understanding of phenomena (Patton, 1999). Triangulation also has been viewed as a strategy to test validity through the convergence of information from different sources. I employed the methodological strategy of triangulation to increase the credibility of this study. Conducting both joint and individual interviews allowed for comparisons, cross-checking, and a form of methodological triangulation because of the ability to observe and document, in detail, the couple’s interactions during the interview (Morris, 2001).

Peer Debriefing. During the analyses, I verified if the interpretation of the processes and interactions in the setting were valid by video recording the virtual interviews, storing audio recordings, and keeping detailed audio notes for cross-examination with my dissertation chair. I examined my assumptions and considered alternative ways of looking at the data (Bloomberg

& Volpe, 2016). My journal indicates timely redirection of inquiry consistent with the critiques obtained during these debriefings (Guba, 1981).

Negative Case Analyses. It is crucial to address confirmability and examine competing explanations and discrepant data (Maxwell, 2013). This process involved searching for and discussing elements of the data that did not support or contradict patterns or explanations that emerged from the data analyses (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1999). Per these recommendations, I committed to the examination and presentation of negative instances or discrepant findings that challenged the dominant themes, and refined working assumptions if the inquiry advanced in light of the negative evidence (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles et al., 2014).

Member Checks. Finally, prior to writing up the results, I provided participants with a summary of findings that I was not sure about or wished for them to further explain. This procedure, in times of uncertainty, aimed to ensure that my own opinions did not influence how I portrayed the participants' perspectives and experience. This helped to further establish the trust of the research study's findings. Participants' approval of the summary added merit that the findings were accurate and true (Carlson, 2010). These member checks came in the form of emails, text messages, or brief phone calls that did not last longer than ten minutes. There were no repeat interviews carried out in this study.

Dependability

This criterion refers to whether one could track the processes and procedures used to collect and interpret the data to the extent that research findings could be replicated by other similar studies (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Sandelowski (1986) advised that a study and its

findings were auditable when another researcher could follow the decision trail. Koch (2006) further contended that when a qualitative study was dependable, another researcher with the same data, perspective, and situation could arrive at the same or comparable, but not contradictory, conclusions. To this end, the following two procedures were employed:

Audit Trail. As recommended, I kept a journal to chronicle the evolution of my thinking as a researcher and documented the rationale of all choices and decisions made during the research process. This audit trail offered a “transparency of method” and provided detailed and thorough explanations of how the data were collected and analyses performed (Merriam, 1998). Records of raw data, audio notes, and a reflexive journal was created and made available to my dissertation chair to report the research process and include reports of revisions to the research protocol, keeping a record of when and how changes were implemented, thus creating a clear audit trail.

“Dependability” Audit. As advised by Guba (1981), my dissertation chair conducted a dependability audit. This was a faculty member at a Research I institution, familiar with qualitative methodologies employed in social science research work, as well as specifically familiar with the theories and methodologies employed. The purpose of this dependability audit was to examine the audit trail described above, and comment on the degree to which the procedures used fell within the accepted practices. This audit focused on the processes of inquiry in the current study.

Confirmability

The concept of confirmability parallels from the notion of investigator objectivity in quantitative research, but shifts towards a concept of interpretational confirmability in

qualitative inquiry. The implication is that the findings reported were the result of the experiences of the participants, rather than the outcome of subjected influence, personal feelings, and preferences of the researcher (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016; Guba, 1981. In qualitative research, to aim to reach complete objectivity or to remain impartial as a researcher to a particular phenomenon of study is futile. I employed the following strategies to enhance confirmability.

Investigator Triangulation. As previously noted in the criterion for credibility, triangulation is collecting data from a variety of perspectives, using different methods and drawing upon diverse sources for purposes of comparison, corroboration, and synthesis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Saldaña & Omasta, 2016). If feasible to do so, it is recommended to employ other investigators, as a form of triangulation, so that a researcher's predictions were tested as strenuously as possible (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). By using coding schemes and categories consistently throughout, and by providing a detailed audit trail, I solicited the assistance from my dissertation chair to enhance confirmability by: (a) asking her to conduct a "data audit" examining the data collection and analyses procedures, and make judgements about the potential for partiality or misrepresentation of the data; and (b) play a "devil's advocate" role with respect to the results, and document this process and subsequent findings. I did not secure a second-coder to code several interviews to establish inter-rater reliability, as I originally intended and advised by qualitative scholars (Miles et. al, 2014). Rather, my dissertation chair listened to select interviews to check my analytical interpretations.

Transferability

Unlike generalizability in traditional quantitative methods, transferability is not concerned with whether the findings are generalizable to a representative sample. Instead, this concept addresses how well the study has made it possible for readers to decide whether similar processes will work in their settings and communities (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016; Lincoln & Guba, 2000/2009). By using thick, detailed descriptions of the knowledge and understanding derived from this study, and further understanding and describing in detail a person's decision to abstain from sex until marriage, as well as including any underlying relationship processes, this study has met the criterion of transferability to other groups from similar locales and background characteristics of the couples interviewed.

In summary, several steps were employed to ensure overall trustworthiness throughout the design, implementation and analyses of this present study. By employing the above efforts, and in gaining an overall coherent understanding of this phenomena, my aim was to add credibility to the findings that emerged from the present study and add a contribution to the body of literature on African American relationships and marriage.

Delimitations

Delimitations are conditions I intentionally imposed in order to limit the scope of the present study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). In addition to the inclusion of African American married couples, the duration of SA criteria of at least six months also qualifies as a delimitation. In the review of limitations noted in the extant literature, the abstinence duration criterion was added to allow for a certain period of time to lapse for couples to effectively explain their experiences, perceptions, and reveal various relationship processes in comparison

to when they were not practicing, with their current partner or with others. The time also allowed for processes and changes to occur within their relationship, and not attribute them to some other variable (Oldham, 2019; Willoughby et al., 2014). Again, the aim of this study was exploratory and was expected to serve as an entry point to the lived experiences and relationship processes of couples who abstained until marriage. To conclude, the delimitations described above were carefully examined and integrated during the analyses, interpretation, and dissemination of this study's results.

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided a detailed description of this study's methodology. Phenomenology was suited best to explore a sample of African American married couples' perceptions on why they decided to abstain from sex until marriage for at least six months, how SA was defined, and understand the processes linked to remaining SA until married. The aim was to purposefully select married couples, utilizing a single data collection method of semi-structured interviews, both individual and dyadic form. Due to the limitations of finding a sample of individuals who meet the study's criteria (i.e., African American, married, abstained from sex until marriage for at least six months), the data were collected virtually via video teleconference software Zoom. Upon data collection, statements and quotes of the participants were checked against the literature for emerging themes. Credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability were accounted for throughout various stages of the process, taking special care to bracket and reflect on potential biases that may have been raised due to the intimate and personal nature that this phenomenon holds to me as the researcher.

The main goal of this phenomenological study was to examine the existing research on SA and explore an individual's decision to abstain from sex until marriage and the underlying relationship processes that unfolded. Given the trends in African American marriage, it was warranted to research this unexplored phenomenon of abstaining from sex until marriage. The in-depth accounts that I provide have the potential to make a contribution to the existing literature and will be of value to others who are invested in the lived experiences of African Americans couples.

CHAPTER 4. RESULTS

Overview

This chapter presents the key findings obtained from the in-depth individual and dyadic virtual interviews from 10 ($N=20$) African American married couples who abstained from sex for at least six months prior to marriage. For a more detailed introduction to each couple, refer to the Couple Vignettes provided in APPENDIX A. Here, I will describe the major findings, how they were categorized, and the subsequent categories and themes that emerged from these data. I will present results related to the participants lived experience, the research that this study aimed to address. Additionally, I will describe the insight gleaned from the participants on how their experience have influenced others, and the guidance that was often provided. The chapter will close with a brief summary of dyadic interactions and a synopsis describing the comprehensive lived experience of the couples who participated.

I will first describe the participants' lived experiences using seven main categories, with subsequent themes that emerged from the data: Motivations, Challenges, and Sexual Decision-Making, in both their youth and as an adult. Further relational themes emerged: Spiritual Connections Allowable Behaviors, Boundaries and Support, and Connections among SA, Relationships, and Marriage. Although these seven categories were used to organize the major findings, I will describe the participants "stories" and experiences in the natural order that they were told, developmentally, from youth, adulthood, during romantic partnership and now marriage.

The Experience of SA as Youth

Motivations

As participants were asked about the factors that motivated their decisions to abstain from sex until marriage, many began their story with their upbringing, the environment in which they were raised, and other factors that influenced their decisions to abstain. A summary of these themes is outlined in Table 4.

Table 4. Summary of Thematic Analysis: SA as a Youth: Motivations, Challenges and Decision-Making

Themes	n	Summary of findings
Motivations		
“The right thing to do”: Religious beliefs	18	Participants were motivated by their religious belief that premarital sex is a sin, reinforced by religious parents and frequent church attendance.
“Don’t go down my same path”: Parental and familial influence	18	Although secondary, premarital sexual behaviors of family and friends (i.e., out of wedlock births, teen pregnancies, observed strained relationships) motivated SA in youth.
“I was scared”: Fear of pregnancy or STDs	4	Youth were also motivated by fear of getting pregnant or contracting an STD, and associated fear of parental consequences.
Desire for a “different” life	4	Participants shared that they not only feared their parents, or getting pregnant, but also wanted something different for their lives.
Challenges		
Common pressures of the virgin teen	10	As a teen, challenges to abstinence were described as curiosity of sex, low self-esteem from being ostracized, friends being more experienced, a need for social currency or intimacy.
Decision-making		
Decision to abstain: “I followed the rules”	15	Despite the challenges, the majority of the participants shared that they followed the rules of the church and house, to practice SA until marriage.
Distractions from sex: “Keeping busy”	12	Participants kept busy and distracted from sex with activities: church, sports, community service, academics, and dance.
Decision to have sex: “I was curious”	5	Participants gave reasons why they decided to have as youth, despite their religious beliefs.
Need for intimacy	1	One participant shared the need for intimacy, sought attention, that led to sexual debut.

“The Right Thing to Do”: Religious Beliefs. Eighteen participants reflected on their journey to abstaining from sex with statements such as being raised in the church, or as Freeman emphasized, “Well, I was basically born on the footsteps of a church. So I've been

going to church all my life.” Seven of the participants reported that they were a “preacher’s kid” with either one or both of their parents being ministers or pastors. Frequent church attendance provided constant reinforcement of “the rule” that sex was a sin, and therefore it should not be done. Irrespective of their parent’s positions at the churches they attended, 15 of the participants noted that this mandate was reiterated in their homes by their parents, either explicitly or implicitly.

Six participants indicated that their parents did not talk about it, but they understood it was the expectation. As noted by Lisa: “It was just something that, it was a spoken and unspoken rule that we were not to have sex until marriage, just based off of my upbringing in the church.” The other six participants shared that their parents explicitly noted that sex before marriage was something that they should not do. Freeman said,

Well, my mother and father, they told us you know, you’re supposed to wait until marriage. You know, we were not supposed to fornicate before marriage. So I was taught. I was definitely taught that we're doing things the right way.

Savannah expressed a slightly different experience in her upbringing and conversations with her parents about sex before marriage:

I grew up in a very faith-filled house. I wouldn't say it was religious because I think religion comes with empty meaning and direction, but they were very big on teaching us why we love the Lord and why you'd love for him and so I was able to connect to my, how I lived my life with My walk with the Lord not just like, “because I'm supposed to.”

Five participants expressed that their upbringing and parental guidance led them to their own individual belief that sex before marriage was a sin, which solidified their decision to abstain as a youth. Denise said,

But, um, I came to this just because it just was always right. Like it was a given. In terms of, I just felt, that, if you are a Christian, that, yeah, like, the Bible says it so... why you gone have sex?

Three of the female participants reported that their parent(s) enrolled them into a faith-based abstinence only program at their church. Two participants said that the messages learned reinforced what they had already believed about sex before marriage, where the third had a difference of opinion. Lisa reflected:

I know my mom tried to put me in something at our church called True Love Waits. It did not take. I didn't take it because of my schedule. It didn't take because I did not see the benefit of talking about sex infiltrating. "This is what pornography is." And even as a young like I was 15 or 14, I was like, This is not something I do not want to see. And so she took me out. It was like, yeah, whatever.

Although 19 participants were religious and had religious upbringing with parent(s) who reinforced the standard, participants added motivators to abstain from sex until marriage, that were expressed as secondary to religion. These reasons were predominantly the avoidance (and sometimes fear) of pregnancy or contracting an STD. For many, these reasons were attributed, in a sense, to their upbringing as well.

“Don’t go down my same path”: Parental and Familial Influence. Once their religious beliefs and upbringing were expressed, 18 participants mentioned that their decision to abstain

as a youth was motivated by the premarital behaviors of others. Six participants noted that their parents had children out of wedlock. Two participants noted that their parents had a child in their teens, one parent who had multiple children before marriage, and another stated his father had an outside child while being married. Similarly, Mia recalls her mother being pregnant on her wedding day:

My mom, like my mom was a Christian. She didn't have a whole lot of examples.

And she wanted to wait till she got married, but she had sex and got pregnant. Then they got married. And then that's exactly what my brother did. He had a girlfriend, she got pregnant, and *then* they got married. Like their, their wedding photos are almost the same...and I was like, no, no harsh judgment, but I just see, I just saw the chain, and how hard it was to break. My brother would say like, "I'm not, I'm not gonna do that." But he did.

Collectively, four participants witnessed their older siblings conceive children before marriage, two participants noting that their siblings were in their teens at the time of the birth. Additionally, three other participants witnessed their close family members and friends having sex and getting pregnant, or getting others pregnant. Andrea reflected on her experience observing single parenting:

Just seeing them kind of struggle and go through, you know, the things that they went through with their [children's] fathers, the kids and things like that. It just really made me feel like okay, that is not something that, you know, I want to participate in.

In terms of reinforcement, five of the participants not only observed their parents' mistakes, but also mentioned that their transparency helped as a guide to abstain. Renae spoke

on the influence that her parents had on her decision to abstain: “They've always brought me up with the knowledge of their past and things that they did as young people that they didn't want me to go down the same path.”

“I was scared”: Fear of Pregnancy or STDs. Four participants admitted to a fear-based decision of abstaining from sex until marriage, specifically a fear of getting pregnant or contracting an STD. Two participants feared having their parents find out they were having sex. Freeman explained his mother’s message:

My mother, she always talked to us about AIDS. I mean HIV. You know, she said “if you get sick, all your days are gonna be gonna be sick, sore and can't hardly move. And just coughing and throwing up, that this weakens your body...and if you ever feel good, it's probably just be one day...you know, just be sick until you die.” So she put that fear in me ...because you really don't know what another person have.

Two others mentioned horror stories that their parents share, like Addison’s account:

I think I had a fear because my mama told me that she had been raped. And then, I knew of my sister being raped. And these were things I think (pause), I already, I was already afraid of rape.

Desire for a “Different” Life. Four participants said that they not only feared their parents, or getting pregnant, but just knew that they wanted something different for their lives. Ramon mentioned about teen pregnancy that ran through his family:

My great grandmother had my grandmother at 17. My grandmother had my father at 17. My father had me at 17. And it was just a pattern. And I took it upon myself to take a

stance and say, it stops with me. I have four sisters who are looking up to me, and I'm going to be that one to set this tone to set the standard for them.

Nathaniel explained that he didn't want to make the same mistakes as he has seen from a societal standpoint:

That helped with this decision. I was supposed to go to prison. I was supposed to have multiple kids out of wedlock. I was supposed to do this that and the other, and I'm just like, yeah, that's just not me. I'm not doing that.

Challenges

Common Pressures of the Virgin Teen. All participants agreed that their decision to abstain from sex until marriage was challenged. Half of the participants described challenges to abstain even before leaving high school. There was a sense of a curiosity for sex amongst interviewees, whether it was being introduced to pornography at an early age, or TV shows or movies that they watched. As Anthony mentioned, "everything I took in, all the content that I took in, talked about how [sex] was important as a man." Addison mentioned, "I was always very curious about people's experience of losing their virginity, or just sex. And so I wanted to know, and I was always, I just wanted to know the experience."

The theme of other social pressures emerged, as three participants mentioned having low self-esteem growing up, often referring to themselves as a "square" or different. Two males mentioned not being "Black enough," sometimes being bullied for "talking White." As Jacob described, "My mom would just act like she didn't hear you, if you said any slang words out of your mouth. So, like, um, for Black people, that creates a perfect storm." One even mentioned

being so “square” that his friends would take his girlfriends. Moses reported his experience taking a girl to the prom:

The two of them jokers [classmates] were on top of her like white on rice, trying to pursue her. And I didn't know about it, but they ended up dating. And I think one of them, I think one of them got her pregnant.

One participant shared a need for intimacy that came early in their life, a challenge that was later expressed as related to their abstinence journey.

As described above, 10 participants echoed an experience of being the “minority” in terms of their inexperience with sex as a teen that often led to a natural curiosity, social pressure or a need for intimacy that led to them entertaining the possibility of having sex.

Sexual Decision-Making as a Youth

The Decision to Abstain: “I followed the rules.” Nineteen participants stated that their decision to abstain from sex until marriage was rooted in their religious beliefs and upbringing in the church that held the mandate that sex before marriage was a sin. For many, this mandate was reinforced by observing their parents, as well as their own fears of pregnancy, sexual violence and STDs.

Distractions from Sex: “Keeping Busy:” As twelve participants continued to replay their teenage years abstaining from sex, another theme emerged, being distracted from sex. This theme is described best by Lisa, words spoken from her mother: “I mean, that was one thing that my mom did say, you know, you don't want the distraction of sex.” Overtly, five participants indicated that they stayed busy serving in youth programs at their local church, four of the male participants being heavily involved in sports, three were focused on school,

and one female was highly active in dance. In addition to keeping busy, three of the participants noted that having a small network of like-minded friends helped to abstain as a youth. For one couple, they met while they kept busy, and were like-minded as young partners. Avery shared,

We got together at 14 or 15. I forgot. I think we were 15...With us both growing up at the same church is kind of like, we were raised differently, but we were still in the same type of community. So, culturally, we were compatible. We had a very similar upbringing. We both had a mom and dad in the house and, and stuff like that. We went to church every Sunday. We both did extracurricular activities at church, like she was one of the main dancers at [the church]. I was doing everything at [the church]. I was just always there.

As previously noted, five participants engaged in premarital sex prior to turning 18 years old. As this was not a main focus of the study, the insight gained on the motivations of youth to have sex provides a contrast to what shifted in terms of when they chose to abstain. Additionally, these segments were included as they are a part of the participants' lived experiences, which was often referenced when speaking of abstaining in adulthood.

The Decision to Have Sex: "I was Curious." Four males lost their virginity before leaving high school, all attributed some aspect to their curiosity for sex. As Warren mentioned, when asked what motivated him to have sex as a teen, "Umm curiosity. My girlfriend wasn't a virgin and I was...so I think I just wanted to try it...it was a trap (laughter)." Nathaniel shared his experience, "I wouldn't say motivated, idle time was the culprit. We [high school girlfriend] literally just came to the conclusion that we wanted to try intercourse out."

Two males mentioned the media that piqued their curiosity, one noting exposure to pornography at an early age, and the other to the movies he watched as a teen. Anthony elaborated:

[It happened] the summer before senior year. It was kind of like, "Let me get this over with, I can't go to college a virgin." The culture portrayed in media played a big part, watching these coming-of-age White boy movies like "American Pie." They were all square anyway. It was imperative that they lose their virginity before getting to college, or it would've gotten worse... Like, what if Will Smith was abstaining in "Fresh Prince of Bel Air"? That would have been dope. But of course, it would've been Carlton. There's no way I was going to be Carlton.

Mia, a female participant who reported sex before 18, briefly mentioned her emotional state around the time she hit puberty.

Just the emptiness that I was going through that I felt. I had to fill myself with all of that, you know... And I didn't. I didn't do it knowing like, "Oh, let me go, you know, just be intimate with a guy because I feel lonely."

In summary, a total of five participants shared their experience with sex and the factors that trumped their original decision to abstain from sex until marriage, although they knew that it was the "right thing to do."

The Experience of SA in Adulthood

While some participants expressed struggles in their abstinence as a youth, for most participants, emerging into adulthood is when they began to face more difficulties and challenges with their stance of reserving sex until marriage.

Challenges

Several dominant themes emerged in the interviews in terms of challenges to abstain as a young adult. Two of which were seen as a “constant struggle” that was accompanied by an increase in sexual desire or temptation, and the exposure to risky behaviors during this time period.

“A Constant Struggle:” Sexual Temptation and Exposure to Risky Behaviors. Fourteen participants either started college or entered environments where eventually they engaged in behaviors they never had experienced before. Seven males in the study reported an increase in attention from females during their young adult years, whether it was due to their line of work (i.e., musician), an increase in athletic ability, or even a boost in their looks and confidence in attracting women. This influx of female attention contributed to the “constant struggle” during these years. Jacob explained,

During that transition time from, from high school to community college, I kind of came into myself and you know, I, what I got coming [was] confidence and all this stuff. So there was this one summer before I met Addison where I dated like five girls in one summer.

Freeman shared his experience with increased attention:

I used to have braids, and something about those braids drew women like, I don't know. I'm, I think I'm a fairly good-looking man, but when I had worn braids...I'll tell you, it was something about them braids.

Moses mentioned beginning his career in the music industry,

I was around so much dope, so much party life, and that was, that, that was my exposure to kind of sexual life, it was like it came with the, it came with the surroundings, you know.

Similarly, seven participants described taking on behaviors such as drinking alcohol, watching pornography, experimenting with marijuana, and going to parties. Aaliyah shared being a member of a college sorority and her experience with drinking alcohol. "I don't, I didn't like, like getting drunk. I don't like being like, out of control. And if I ever was drunk, it was usually more around my girlfriends than anybody else." Five participants avoided risky behaviors all together. Savannah mentioned, "I wasn't big on like big crowds and going out to parties and all. Like, I don't think I ever went through that phase."

While some mentioned being tempted with behaviors such as alcohol or drugs, others agreed that their main challenge during young adulthood was sexual temptation. Roderick identified his main challenge to abstain as,

Freedom. I lived on campus... I was close enough to where I could drive home. But um...you live in the dorm, you don't have to go home. You don't, nobody really knows what's going on. So you know, at that point, it was just...college. Everyone just wants to have fun, meet people. Everybody's hormones are going at that age, 18, you're 19 years old, everybody's just very hormone driven.

Denise even questioned God directly on why she was experiencing sexual desires if she was supposed to abstain:

I was really confused. I did not understand. And I sat with myself and talked to the Lord...I started, it's like, it was literally like a faucet. It was literally like a positive on, a lot

of different fronts right away emotionally, even spiritually, it felt like, and I felt, um, I didn't understand. I was like, I just felt a desire that I had not...I knew what it was, but I was like, oh my gosh. I never had wanted somebody before.

Along with a new sense of freedom for many, came the nuances of navigating romantic relationships. For the abstaining young adult, this presented its own challenges as described in the next section.

Dating as “The Virgin.” Fourteen participants shared specific challenges with dating while practicing SA. Nine participants shared that they had issues with mate selection. Four participants shared that they often dated the wrong type. As Jacob described his challenge with dating aggressive women, “Why, if I'm a sensitive person, am I looking for some aggressive person who's just gonna, like beat on me?...not physically but beat on me. And that's kind of what was happening.” Or put differently by Addison,

I already knew that they were just never, we weren't on the same level in terms of our values, or where we're headed in any kind of different capacity. I think I was just always trying to give myself or like, give the other person, the benefit of the doubt.

Both genders shared challenges of being rejected for their religious beliefs. Freeman shared:

Women I was dating, or I was interested in...after they found out my character, how I'm in church, you know it kind of turned them away...They wanted somebody like a “thug/good guy,” and I really wasn't drinking and smoking, and it turned a lot of women away after a couple of dates.

Renae offered,

And there was one time as well that I was actually out to lunch with a gentleman. And he told me that I feel the presence of God all over you. I can't sit here anymore and he got up from the table and left. He did pay for my lunch though (laughter).

Although females and males expressed trials arising at this point in time, the challenges with dating appeared to show up slightly different for the female participants. For the males, the increase in attention may have challenged their ability to abstain, but it often came with a fair share of women, despite the challenges. As Avery shared, "It was kind of easier to date girls, when you're 20, 21 or whatever, when they know that you ain't trying to have sex with them." For women, it was another story.

As for women who were abstaining as a young adult, six of them felt that they were ostracized, often looked at as if they were better than others, or different, or left out of some conversations. Destiny recalled her experience: "People feeling some type of way towards you. Um, you know, some people may have thought like, I thought I was better than them. And that definitely was not the case." Addison mentioned "I guess, because they, they, were changing because of, I guess whatever standards I had set, they [men] were treating me differently because of that."

Although dating consistently, three of the female participants experienced constant rejection and subsequent disappointments. Three females expressed being in a relationship where their partner(s) cheated on them several times. As described by Andrea,

Then something would happen like pretty much every relationship that I was in, they cheated. And I would always just be like, what I say, be honest, like just say that you

can't, you know, handle it or whatever. ...And so I just felt like, "Come on, man, I said, say something."

Other females ascribed their emotional heartache to their naiveté and unpreparedness for dating, as Savannah shared: "When I went to college, I think I was not fully prepared for how guys attack. I didn't, I just went into [it] very naive thinking the best of everybody."

As described differently by Denise:

I was taking the initiative and things and that just doesn't work...I would say, "I love you" first and I just thought, "Well, you know, I am supposed to do as Christian, like Jesus, love and sacrifice." And so I was doing all like what you call "missionary dating," ...reaching out, doing things that I didn't know were undermining dating.

Other women began to doubt that someone would honor their choice. A recollection from Aaliyah represents this mind frame clearly:

I always felt like to some degree I was going to have to compromise in some way or another. So, in that, meaning, like, what you'd be willing to do, versus what you wouldn't be willing to do. Like how far you'd be willing to go. I always felt like that was inevitable because you feel like no one else would want to be with you.

"What if I do, what if I don't?" Conflict with Belief in SA. With the increased exposure to risky behaviors and elevated sexual temptations, seven participants who abstained in young adulthood expressed having conflicted feelings about choosing not to have sex. Four participants felt that everyone was having sex, including Christians, as Lisa stated: "Mind you all the people who tell you not to have sex before marriage, have sex." Or from Moses's experience at his home church, "Many of the cases, some of the ministers were hiding

something and the ministers were doing things behind closed doors.” Nathaniel recounted a conversation he had with his best friend, his only friend who was also abstaining at the time:

I remember very, very interesting transition time because he was like “Hey, man, I can't find anything in the Bible that specifically says, ‘Don't do it.’” I was like, “What?” He's like, “Yeah, like, I've been asking my dad about it. Like, I can't find something that says, ‘Don't do it’...I can't believe I've done it this long!” ... So a long story [short]...he was on the cusp.

Although this is a recount of a friend of the participant, it clearly depicts the frustrations and struggles they were experiencing during that time. Anthony described his internal conflict with the church's message of sex before marriage as a sin.

When I went to college, I was like, I'm not going to church, like for what? Like, why would I get up early on a Sunday morning? Go do all these things like buy church clothes, have this alternative lifestyle, that doesn't actually suit me, right? For it to have really no effect on my life. It's just in my thoughts, like it's just constraining me from doing what I want to do, it's just making me feel like, think twice or feel bad about what I want to do.

“Growing Weary.” Two female participants remained virgins into their thirties and forties. Their unique experience is that dating had its challenges, like many others, however, when asked how they managed to cope remaining a virgin, it appeared that growing weary in their singleness was unavoidable. Like when Denise was asked if she ever lost hope, “Oh Lord, yeah 100 million zillion times ...about doing it the right way and God was not producing ... and plus, I was horny, too. Oh my God. Yeah.” And affirmed by Renae, “Um, well, you know, you

attend so many other people's weddings. And you show up to Christmas by yourself, Thanksgiving by yourself, different events. Things like that.”

For these two women, the theme was that their faith in God helped during their prolonged abstinence period, and that they kept busy in the meantime. Like Denise mentioned, I read lot of books...I started preparing for marriage. The other thing that I got to is like, okay, “Maybe God, I am not ready.” I started, because I still had some anger, I was doing therapy. Also, I was really busy. I never had been the kind of woman that's just sitting around. I was getting my, you know, my doctorate, and I also said that I had never wanted to be married before finishing my doctorate. I didn't know it's gonna take so long, but um, that all helped.

For Renae, she also made peace with God,

As you know, a woman getting older...I was just, you know, saying, “Look [God,] if you want me to be single, I'll just be single the rest of my life. I'm okay with that”... At the time...I was looking for a property to buy for myself.

As for these two virgin women, who remained abstinent until marriage perhaps longer than what they expected, their faith in God is what sustained them. For the remaining participants, who had not already had their sexual debut as a youth, or partnered earlier in their adulthood, thoughts about premarital sex changed and spiraled to the onset of sexual activity.

Sexual Decision-Making in Adulthood

The Decision to Have Sex: “The flesh is weak, but the heart is willing.” This theme represents what participants felt when they decided to have sex as an adult. This theme

emerged among seven participants as they shared their experience and what motivated them to decide to have sex. Three participants explicitly mentioned that although sex was a sin, they had a different opinion about abstinence itself. Freeman stated it plainly, "I knew it was wrong, all my friends had lost count. I had a lustful spirit too, I just acted on it." Tracy mentioned when asked why she chose to have sex as an adult, "Pressure from myself, and curiosity. I didn't understand the value of waiting."

"I Lost my Identity." Losing identity was an expression that was used by three participants. Two female participants did not decide to have sex, mentioning that they were still committed to abstaining when their "virginity was taken from them." One while being intoxicated at a college party and an associate took advantage of her. Another was in a relationship, but never gave consent. As Savannah described her boyfriend at the time, "He was literally crazy, like, he was very abusive, emotionally and, and turning physically. Um, and in that relationship, I never gave consent to have sex, but he initiated it and there was like no stopping him." Destiny discussed that her first time was consensual, but was equally traumatic.

And my first sexual experience was very tumultuous. It was very bad. I landed in the hospital...and I think, you know, I was like 20 at the time. Um, there was a lot of shame there a lot of guilt there because I knew I should have remained a virgin. And here I am stepping out of what I know to be true. And this is what happens to me [lacerations from intercourse]...I wake up from the procedure that they did. And he was gone. He was gone. And it was my roommate that was left to help me pick up the pieces and figure it all out. It was a really, really dark time.

“God did not Reward me.” The notion of a reward from God was one belief a participant shared—that if they abstained from sex, that God would reward them. When they experienced opposition, or that expectation was not met, their thoughts on abstinence changed. For example, Roderick said,

They cut me from the basketball team. My, my sophomore year, they cut me, and I left the school because I'm like, if I'm not going to play ball, I'm not going to be at a school where all my friends are playing basketball and I'm just watching from the sidelines. And I think at that point, I think something switched in me to where, when it came to like, abstinence, I just didn't care anymore. I think, I just stopped caring because it's, and I look back on it, I did, I did things to earn God's favor, and that's just not how it works, you know? And so that's, I, (long pause) the first time I ever had sex, I was 21.

To summarize the experience of SA in adulthood, once the participants became young adults, there was an increased exposure to life beyond the walls of the church or confinements of their parents' home. There was new freedom, and for some, a new level of attraction received from the opposite sex, and an elicited physical awakening that they had never experienced. Participants expressed that they began to question their stance to abstain from sex until marriage, with challenges of dating and as new physical desires began to emerge. This “constant struggle” is what began the need to decide for themselves if abstinence was something they still wanted to do. By their mid-twenties, 12 participants engaged in penile-vaginal intercourse before marriage, despite their belief that sex before marriage was a sin and for some, contrary to their initial plans to wait until marriage. Collectively, five participants had sex before the age of 18, and an additional seven between the ages of 18 and 25.

A Decision to (Re)Commit to God to SA. For all participants, there was a period of time that was expressed as a recommitment to God, despite whether their stance on abstinence had remained the same or had changed over time. All participants shared a single, or series of spiritual encounters that led them to a commitment (distinguished from a mere decision) to abstain from sex until marriage. For all, the theme for this time period was represented by a relationship with God followed by a (re)commitment to God to abstain until marriage.

Relationship with God. All of the participants expressed having a sincere reverence, love, or fear of God, often referring to their “relationship with God.” Six participants described this relationship developing once they got older, and described it as getting “in alignment,” “back right,” “more serious,” or “devoted” to God. Aaliyah mentioned, “I think being younger it [decision to abstain] wasn't personal, but the older that I got, it became more personal. It became more about me wanting to be in alignment with God.”

For four participants, this relationship with God came early on in youth, similar to how Denise explained, “I was just different, um, different on many fronts different in terms of my seriousness with God from a really, really young age. I had a great reverence for God and a great fear in a healthy way.”

Three participants described their personal relationship with God developed after spending time with God, in terms of prayer, reading the Bible and journaling. Dave recalled a day after spending more time with God.

I lived in a studio apartment. No money. So it's so little money that I had no lights, so I had no electricity. So what I would, I would stay up all night with the candle and just read the Bible. One morning, I woke up Sunday morning, and went to this church down

the street, but I've never been, didn't know anybody at the church. I just walked to the church it was probably a mile away and walked to the church. And they asked us anybody want Jesus? I just went to the altar.

There were three others that described their relationship with God as a feeling of his existence, similar to a physical presence of a person, providing protection. As Addison mentioned, "Anytime I would attempt to like break out of my little purity [something would happen]...I always saw it as that, I always saw like, God was protecting me from different things." Three participants explained that God "showed up" in a time when sexual temptations were heightened. For instance, Denise shared,

I started learning to pray differently. I started learning that if I have this great, great, great, great need that feels like it's consuming my whole body, and you've not brought me a husband, and you are God, you made me, and you're supposed to be able to provide my needs, then there's a level of you that I don't have, because I feel like I'm in torment, and I should not be in torment. So I need you. So I started crying out to God, in my horniness and I would be in that place...and God would meet me in that place.

Renaee stated:

You know, sometimes I just felt like I needed somebody to hold me while I cry, help me, you know, because at that moment...you're sort of broken in pieces, because you (pause) it's a very hard thing. It was by the grace of God I came through that situation and that heartache...I thought I wanted, you know, affection, and you know, their support in that way at that time, but that wasn't what I needed.

Anthony shared his relationship with God and His "presence" in another way:

God started changing me, like it was, you know, sanctification without my permission...God came to the back door of my heart, and just changed it without my permission. So it's like someone come into your house, everything's moved around.

Despite whether the relationship developed early on, as they grew older, or unexpectedly, the participants shared a time where they began to attend church (again), read their Bibles more, journaling and praying, which developed into a close relationship with God. That relationship led to their salvation, participant's protection while abstaining, and for a few, God moving and changing their hearts. This experience eventually led to either a commitment to continue abstinence, or a re-commitment to return, an experience that is detailed next.

A Commitment to God. As mentioned previously, all participants attributed their decision to abstain from sex until marriage to their personal "relationship with God." For several, their commitment and devotion to God led to the decision or (re) commitment to adhere to abstaining from sex until marriage as only one aspect of "following" God. As Demetrius described, "I took my walk [with God] seriously, I took my relationship with Christ seriously. And so I was all in, in every aspect including sexual activity." Others described their decision as a personal promise or commitment to God, regarding sex, specifically. For example, Moses described how his relationship with God changed, that led to an agreement with God:

Cause I had been going to [new church] for a while. And a lot of things had begun to change in me or something. But I promised to God then, "I will not touch another person until I find what I'm looking for." And "the next time when you give me somebody...I want somebody that prays," I said, "Give me a person that prays."

For two others, their promise to God to abstain until marriage was spoken through pain. As Savannah shared her experience following a traumatic event:

I was, like, crushed that something I had for like 19 years just was taken like that. And I have to realize my worth isn't tied to that, um, my walk with the Lord, that's why I have a relationship with the Lord. Like he renewed me, he restored me, and he turned the ashes basically into beauty and I didn't allow myself, to which I wanted to, allow myself to kind of sink into a place of mind, that I failed. I just failed, like what's the point. But that it's not about us, it's about Him.

There was a similar, yet selfless sentiment described in Renae's prayer to God, as she remembered entering her thirties still abstaining from sex until marriage. "Lord, you know if marriage is not for me, if I'm to be single, my answer is YES to whatever your will is. I'll be okay with that."

In summary, for most participants, challenges did arise in adulthood, with slight differences in gender, yet described as a "struggle" as their environments changed, sexual urges increased and dating began. Although some participants decided to have sex in adulthood, it was their relationship with God that led to a commitment to continue abstinence, or a recommitment to abstain from sex until marriage. This was an individual decision and a commitment made to their spiritual deity. Although participants shared their abstinence journey from youth to adulthood in developmental order, similar themes emerged in both stages, motivations, challenges and decision-making and are summarized in Table 5 .

Table 5. Summary of Thematic Analysis: SA in Adulthood: Motivations, Challenges and Decision-Making

Themes	<i>n</i>	Summary of Findings
Motivations		
Internal religiosity (adulthood)	20	As participants got older, they expressed that their motivation for SA shifted from what they were supposed to do, to what they wanted to do, attributed to their personal devotion to God.
Desire for a “different” life	4	Some participants practiced SA to break generational curses, or decided to abstain to ensure a “different life” than what they saw growing up.
Challenges		
“A constant struggle”	13	As many of the participants started college or careers and moved away from home, new freedom brought new challenges to SA.
Sexual temptation	7	Participants shared an increase in sexual temptation and curiosity for sex, or physical awakening of sexual desire.
Exposure to risky behavior	6	Some participants began to engage in risky behavior, such as drinking, partying, or pornography that challenged SA.
Dating as “The virgin”	14	Both genders expressed issues with choosing the wrong mate, men dated multiple women due to increased attention, where females reported not being approached, cheated on, or rejected due to beliefs.
Conflict with belief in SA	7	Participants shared a conflict with their stance on SA during young adulthood, due to: lack of examples of people abstaining, not understanding the benefits, or began to feel that SA wasn’t realistic, or for a different time.
“Growing weary”	2	Two female participants remained virgins further into adulthood and expressed times of loneliness, further disappointments from dating, and questioning God or the likelihood of marriage.
Decision-making		
Decision to have sex	7	The reason for deciding to have sex as an adult was provided by participants.
Changed belief about SA	3	Participants shared that although they knew considered a sin, that they acted anyway, did not understand its value, or that SA was unrealistic.
“I lost my identity”: Traumatic first sex	3	There were two instances of nonconsensual sex where sex was not a choice, it was “taken”. One other noted it was consensual but traumatic. All three participants expressed that their identity was lost during these events.
Disappointed with God	1	Participant shared a belief that if they abstained from sex, that God would reward them. When they experienced opposition, or that expectation was not met, their thoughts of SA changed and decided to have sex.
Decision to (re)commit to God to SA	20	All participants shared that as an adult, their commitment to SA was to God. To honor, devote themselves, or to get back into alignment with their deity.

Spiritual Connections in Partner Selection

As participants continued to share their abstinence journeys and events that led up to meeting their spouse, all shared that in some way, God participated in the process of selecting

their spouse. This evolved into an unforeseen dominant theme of personal religious connections among the sample, a spiritual alignment to their future spouse, who later shared in their SA experience. This theme and experiences are summarized in Table 6 and described in detail next.

Table 6. Summary of Thematic Analysis: Spiritual Connections in Partner Selection

Themes	<i>n</i>	Summary of Findings
"A spouse sent from God"	20	Many participants experienced a series of single or multiple spiritually-motivated actions or events that helped in partner selection.
God confirmed spouse	9	Confirmation from the Holy Spirit or God Himself about partner through prayer.
God sent spouse	4	Feelings that God sent or led them to their spouse through spiritual encounters.
Divine alignment	4	An encounter attributed to the "Holy Spirit" that led them to meeting or reconnecting with spouse.
Prophetic words from others	3	Described as a message from an outside person that God told that their friend, or partner, would become their spouse.
"We were on the same page"	20	Anonymously, all participants were already abstaining prior to partnering or reconnecting. Therefore, the decision to SA was not coupled, but an individual decision, pursued together. Being on the same page also served as confirmation in the partnering process.

"A Spouse Sent from God"

For all ten couples, each individual attributed their connection with their spouse as something divine in nature. Whether it was how they were aligned with their partner, or how their paths crossed, all of them during their interviews spoke to some type of confirmation from God that their spouse was "the one."

God Sent Spouse. Nine participants stated that God "sent their spouse." Like Avery, who recapped, "I'm like, okay, they say, not to have sex. I don't have sex. And then I meet a girl who says I'm not having sex. And I'm like, okay." Later on in his individual interview, he further

described his spouse, “She's the most amazing, she's God's bespoke woman for me.” Another male participant, Jacob, described how God sent his wife:

But the major thing I feel is that, it feels like God chose Addison for me. And I can literally say that I am a person who had lists, I had things that were like, this is what my girlfriend needs to be like or something like that. And Addison didn't check all those boxes. But she also checked a bunch of boxes I didn't need, boxes that I didn't even know where things... that you could even check those boxes. Basically, I didn't know those were options. And I was selling myself short.

Other ways participants shared that God sent their spouse, was through a word from God Himself about their spouse. Mia shared a period of time that proceeded her husband's romantic pursuit:

About three months before that, I actually heard from God to consider him as a husband. And I was like, “What about dating him (laughter)?” And so for three months, I had been like, intentionally watching him, you know what I mean? To see. To watch. Just to look, you know. God said consider, so I was like, checking them out.

Divine Alignment. There were two couples who reunited after spending years apart, with no expectations of getting back together. The theme presented here is that their reconnection was “divine alignment.” Warren explained,

It was funny because about literally like, a month, month and a half later, is when we reconnected and she had gotten more serious in her spiritual life...I already made this agreement with God, that I was going to chill [not have sex] and he would have to send me the one. Then, this person, who I had always loved, came back into my life. And they

were like, “You know, I made a pact with God that I would not mess around until I got married.” So I was like, “Okay, God, I see. So you gon’ bring her back and then throw me a curveball. This is what you do, right? This your sense of humor again, okay, well, how about this? Game on! I’m ready, we’re doing this!”

A couple recounted how the “Holy Spirit” was involved in their reconnection. Demetrius shared how he and his wife reconnected:

When we got back together, it was not just a fluke. It wasn't a fluke; it was the Holy Spirit. But her sister was interested in just seeing how I was doing. She called...and I wasn't home. I called her sister back...and Tracy answered the phone. We spoke for probably 45 minutes. I [later] said, "I tell you what, whoever you're talking to at this point, you can call them today and let them know that it's a wrap." And she goes "Well, you do the same thing" and that was it...the first 45 minutes of that first phone call. This was after having not spoken for years.

Tracy shared in her interview,

I don't want people to assume when they hear our story that I was so excited that I snagged him back. It was not like that. It was a real connection that you begin to feel like the Lord is doing something.

Stated slightly differently, divine alignment may have meant following the “Holy Spirit” to a certain city or joining a new church, where they eventually met their spouse. Like in Anthony’s case:

Then one day, when I was journaling, was the first time I heard God speak to me. He just cut through like, just, it was weird. It was just like he cut to silence...it's time to move...in

my mind, I hoped something for music would happen and all that, but I knew that that's not what he said. I knew that, like, I just need to say yes, yeah, so I did. Then I moved to [city], and a few months in, that's when I came to [new church].

Anthony later explains, how SA and his move facilitated his divine connection:

“Yeah, I would have never been able to see her for me. Had I been having sex. I probably wouldn't have been at [new church]. I probably would've been out somewhere.”

Prophetic Words from Others. Three individuals shared that they received confirmation; however, their confirmation came through a “prophetic word” (messages from God through others). One couple received multiple confirmations from God that they were meant to date each other after years of being platonic friends. For Ramon, the prophetic word was first received from his Godmother, then later from his college professor, as he recounted his experience:

He goes, “You and Andrea.” I said, “Yes, sir.” “Um, how long have you guys been friends?” “Oh, about, you know, three years.” He goes, “Yeah, I think that that friendship is going to shift. I think it's going to transition.”

Whereas his wife, Andrea, received confirmation another way:

I'm a believer, and God speaks to me through my dreams. And that night [the night her husband expressed romantic interest], I just prayed. I was like, “Lord, you know, [if] this is something that you want me to do...I have to know that it's you.” And that night, I dreamt of our wedding and our kids.

“We Were on the Same Page”

Whether the participants received a confirming word from God, a prophetic word from someone else, or a dream, the mere fact that upon meeting or reuniting with their spouse, and that they were both abstaining, was added confirmation from God that they should select them as a partner. As Nathaniel described,

And prior to us talking, I had abstained for about a year before even asking her to date me. And that kind of culminated. I literally asked her on my birthday to, you know...be official and make it serious and things like that. And she, you know, she agreed, and...that's when I told her that. She was like, “Really?” I was like, yeah, so it was already being done. So the transition was, it was seamless and easy.

His wife, Aaliyah, shared:

The day he asked me to be his girlfriend was the day he had actually been abstinent for a year...so I think...that was good for me going into relationship, especially being at that age, like finding someone else who's willing to journey with you in making that type of decision.

In their accounts of the events surrounding meeting their spouse, all participants mentioned a strengthened relationship with God, a commitment to continue or recuperate their decision to SA, and that one day their paths were “divinely” crossed with their now spouse, and decided on partnering. Anonymously, all participants said that the decision to abstain as a couple was not a decision at all, since they were both already abstaining. Although the decision to abstain from sex until marriage was evident, other decisions in terms of their relationship were not.

The Experience of SA in Romantic Relationships

A common theme that emerged was that couples had to communicate and establish how to navigate dating in order to sustain abstinence. The courtship experience, in terms of what behaviors were allowed, boundaries enacted to remain abstinent, and how they dated differently, is described in the sections to follow.

SA Defined and Allowable Sexual Behaviors

When participants were asked how they defined SA , many began to name that were allowed, and others that were not allowed. These behaviors are exhibited in Figure 1.

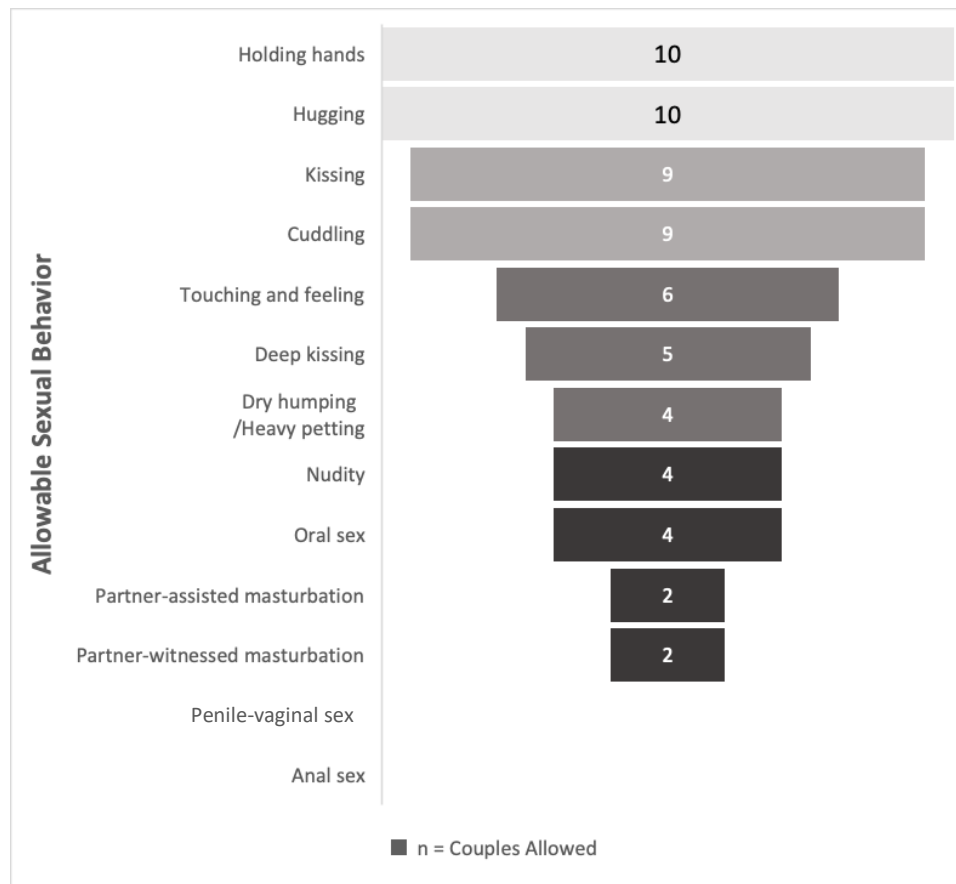


Figure 1. SA Defined and Allowable Sexual Behaviors of Sample

For all of the participants, penetration of any kind—penile-vaginal or anal sex-- was not allowed. This is how they defined “sex” and if that line was crossed, it would have been

considered breaking their abstinence. Like Nathaniel mentioned, “As far as you know, any type of full blown like intercourse, we knew that that was out. So we never, we never walked that line.” Behaviors that were allowed fell along a continuum of intimate physical behaviors, which varied among participants. In summary, all ten couples allowed holding hands and hugging. Nine couples allowed kissing and cuddling with two participants mentioning innocently sitting on their partner’s lap. As Freeman mentioned:

We did a pretty good job of not getting too involved. We were counseled, and the pastor that counseled us told us that we shouldn't get too lovey-dovey because things can, you can go far, further. So we did kiss, you know, hug a couple of times, she sat on my lap, but far as like anything past that, really didn't happen.

Among six couples, they drew the line at heavy petting or deep kissing. As Tracy described:

So like, we could kiss and hold hands and rub each other’s back or arms and stuff like that. And I like to sit close...if we were sitting on a couch or something, so it definitely was physical touch. But then if the rubbing got to be too much then...you know, one of us would be able to say okay, we probably need to stop...We never took it too far. So like no penetration.

Changes to Permissible Behaviors. Modifying what they considered permissible occurred for five couples, with participants continuously re-defining allowable behaviors with either nudity, oral sex or partner assisted/witnessed masturbation. Two couples mentioned that they engaged in these behaviors that was considered “crossing the line” or “going too far,” but was not considered breaking their abstinence. For example, Jacob explained, “We didn’t

feel right about doing that, basically. So I can say we had oral sex before marriage, but sparingly, probably about two or three times, maybe.” Another two mentioned that they engaged in oral sex, but the closer to engagement, the less of these activities they engaged in. One couple brought in a person outside of their relationship for accountability. Savannah recalled,

And most of the things happened while we were dating. I think we were more lax with the accountability. We put in our own boundaries, boundaries in dating, but in regards like outside accountability, I think we really brought that in once we were engaged.

In contrast, a couple who allowed both of the more “advanced” behaviors (oral and partner-involved masturbation) reported that the behaviors increased during their engagement period. For instance, Lisa stated,

I just started [Broadway production]. And I was in New York and he moved in with me. So we lived together for a year of engagement. And that year the touching got a little bit more heavy...I feel that I touched myself with him. I'll say that like I fingered myself. But yeah, so that, and then I was still giving him orals...things actually progressed.

On the other end of the spectrum, two participants considered drawing “the line” at kissing during their courtship. Roderick mentioned, “We started off like, ‘Oh, we're not gonna kiss before we got married’, but...that lasted like 24 hours (laughter).” The other couple kept their agreement to not kiss, and drew the line at holding hands and hugging. During Anthony’s interview, he asserted “Yeah, we didn't kiss, that was too much for me...like for me, it’s just my past, as I wanted to stay as far away from those things as possible.”

This agreement to not kiss was altered once their first wedding date (which was initially six weeks after deciding to date), was postponed to the following year. Mia, the wife of this couple recounted her experience after allowing kissing as a behavior:

I was like, I can't do this [kiss anymore] because when we would leave each other, I would feel heartsick. I would be so sad, and like, long for him, and cry sometimes and just be like, "I just want to be with you." Then I finally figured it out...we were kissing. And so that's like, we're supposed to be, we're supposed to stay together, not separate. For me at least, kissing was gluing us together like that. And so we decided to stop kissing until we got married, even though we didn't know when that would be.

In summary, six couples explained that they did not "cross the line" in terms of their allowable behaviors. For those who did, they talked about it, and readjusted accordingly. As Jacob described,

Times when we crossed the line, we crossed the line together. I mean, we both made a conscious decision. "We're going to cross this line", then right after that, we were both like, "We shouldn't have done that", you know, like that type of thing.

Boundaries

Additionally, couples spoke of situational boundaries that were put in motion, to assist in making sure to protect themselves from "crossing the line," or to assure that it didn't happen again. Next, I summarize the situational or location boundaries that were enforced in Table 7. I then describe in detail the dominant theme or topic that naturally occurred after participants shared their list of allowable behaviors.

Table 7. Summary of Thematic Analysis: SA in Romantic Relationship: Boundaries

Themes	<i>n</i>	Summary of Findings
"Idle time is of the devil's playground"	20	Instead of spending idle time with partner, they worked on self-development, key distractions while abstaining in adulthood.
Church and ministry work	15	Serving in ministry at church, being around like-minded individuals, and serving others.
Educational attainment	13	Pursuing their college degree, often advanced degrees.
Career advancement	11	Focus on career growth, working overtime, seeking promotion or pursuing a passion/purposed focused career.
Healthy relationship and marriage education	4	Participants learned about healthy relationships, through self-help books, mentorship with married couples, and premarital prep.
Health and fitness goals	2	Others focused on physical fitness and health to distract from sex.
Home ownership	2	Two pursued personal homeownership, although unmarried.
Therapy	1	A participant took the opportunity to seek counseling prior to marriage.
"We didn't position ourselves to fail"	16	Other situational boundaries to help adhere to SA included dating outdoors, or not in confined spaces, and self-imposed curfews.
Other areas of abstention:	19	Couples abstained from other areas serving as a boundaries to SA.
Cohabitation	16	Most couples held the belief that living together should be reserved for marriage.
Finances	12	Participants also believed that finances (i.e., bank accounts) were kept separate until marriage.
Alcohol	8	Participants shared that they either abstained from drinking alcohol altogether, or did not engage in each other's presence.
Family/friends	4	There were two instances where spouse was refrained from meeting family members and friends until further in the relationship.
Explicit content	4	Participants refrained from watching pornography or R-rated movies in and outside each other's presence.
Birth control	2	One couple shared not buying condoms or getting on birth control pills as a boundary.

A conversation about boundaries and an agreement between the couples was something that all participants expressed as something they took seriously. As Savannah mentioned, this conversation occurred very early,

We had a conversation about boundaries, but not whether we were going to wait or not, that was an absolute. That would have probably been like a deal breaker. I would have been like, "You're not the one for me."

"Idle Time is of the Devil's Playground." Keeping busy was another recurrent theme shared, speaking of not spending too much idle time with their partner. All participants emphasized the importance of having a life "outside of each other" or staying focused on their

own personal goals and self-development. They attributed this self-focused time to be an additional boundary and a positive factor to their relationship dynamics. Nathaniel said,

Because I'm telling you like, 9, 10, 11 straight days, like, I gotta go. I'm trying to save as much as I can. And I'm trying to, I'm trying to make this work. I'll never have a time such as this, you know, I don't have kids or I'm not married, like, I'm going to work...and so that's kind of what it was. Us not utilizing our time to sit up under each other, and things like that, we didn't have those opportunities when we were around each other...it was, we were just happy to be around one another.

Lisa mentioned how she kept busy:

And then, when I wasn't touring and dancing, I went to [a university] and got my graduate...and maybe that's what abstaining does, it...you know, what is that? What is the phrase "idle time is the devil's playground" or something. So, I'm always, and I'm still like that, which is why am in school right now? I do not necessarily like too much time on my hands, because I don't want to get into trouble. And the trouble was [then] to have sex and I had a boyfriend and you know, we get close.

Although having a life outside of partner helped with sustaining SA, there were certain situational boundaries that were enforced by participants when spending time with their partner.

"We didn't position ourselves to fail." Setting themselves up for success was a recurrent theme when speaking to participants about boundaries. For eight couples, dating in public was the biggest contributor to maintaining abstinence while courting their spouse. Couples mentioned the typical dates such as dinner, the movies, attending church together, the

beach, or other touristy attractions like aquariums, museums and food festivals. Destiny spoke about their tradition of exploring nearby cities or even further discovering their hometown, “So even though he's been...in the city before, we just try to do things that, you know, we normally wouldn't do.” Another couple mentioned that they enjoyed physical dates together, to take the edge off of not having sex. Nathaniel explained,

Our favorite pastimes would be, you know, working out, we worked out together quite a bit, you know, so it wasn't a matter of a date, like date night to a movie or to dinner, like that wasn't a date. We ran.

The second dominant boundary that seven participants put into place was visitation limits. For several, there was no spending the night in each other's home. Others had a curfew for home visits, if going inside each other's home was permitted. For instance, Anthony recalls, “We would sit in the car instead of going [in] each other's houses.” Another couple allowed visits, but only until a certain time, and added additional measures to make sure of it. Roderick detailed his and his wife's experience, “I know that there were sometimes where it was getting late, I'd be hanging out on the front porch. We just talked that way, if we couldn't say bye, you know, so we weren't inside of the house.”

Other Areas of Abstinence. Participants were asked if there were any additional areas of abstinence that they introduced in order to sustain abstinence. For most participants, the dominant theme was “no living together.”

Cohabitation. Eight couples expressed that they did not live together during their courtship, as commented by Destiny, “From jump, you know, it was always my mentality

that I would live with somebody once I was married. And that's, that was always my mindset." Two couples lived together before marriage, both noting that the agreement was not a forethought, but due to circumstance. Addison shared how living together with her partner caused conflict with her friends and family:

What does it mean to live with someone, if it's just about having sex. If that's the only thing, that's the, that's the hedge that you're doing this rule for, is so that you don't have sex. Right? Then, you don't really have another argument...and I knew if they wanted to have that conversation, that I mean, I mean...I knew like, [I could say] I'm still a virgin.

Lisa recalled slightly her friend's response when she decided to live with partner,

That was another thing because people, a lot of my friends were asking like, "Y'all moved in together? Y'all still [abstaining] right?" Then I would say, like, "Oh gosh, guys. Come on, like, it's not that big of a deal." I mean, I get it. But yeah.

Denise shared her opinion on abstaining couples living together: "I don't necessarily agree with that because now, you're giving the appearance of evil. The Bible says don't give the appearance of evil. So now people think you're living together and not married."

Finances. Another area of abstention that emerged was refraining from combining finances. Six of the couples did not combine finances until they were married. Avery looked at it differently than how the question was presented: "We didn't combine finances. We didn't see it as abstaining, we saw it as being smart. You're not married, until you're married." Three couples combined finances once they were engaged. There was one remaining couple who had

still not combined finances. Andrea explained, “but for the most part, all of our stuff is still separate. And not for lack of us not wanting to do it. It's just we, we just don't have the time.”

Alcohol or Drugs. There were five couples that included at least one partner who abstained from drugs and alcohol during their courtship prior to marriage. Addison mentioned not drinking as another area she refrained from:

So sexual abstinence was one of them and then drinking. It led me, and I knew it later, to being around certain people. And unless I know them and know the environment that I'm in...I can't just drink with anyone, I can't just do drugs...I don't like being out of control, basically. So any of those things that are going to put me in a position where I feel out of control, then no.

Her husband, Jacob added, “I had all my high times of drinking before I met Addison.” Nathaniel and Aaliyah shared in their couple interview,

We didn't really party together like that. Like, we didn't really drink together like...that wasn't something that we did together, like very often like, especially at a young age, like getting drunk or drinking. Not that we didn't do it. We just didn't do it together. I think that actually helped, I think that because drinking changes things, too.

Explicit Content. Two couples shared that they refrained from explicit content (e.g., watching pornography, Rated-R movies) both outside and within each other's presence as Ramon shared, “So that was another thing we strived to restrain from, you know, if we can sense it, if we can smell it, if we felt like, um, this is not good.”

Family and Friends. When asked about friends and family, most did not abstain from introducing friends or family to their partners. There were only two instances reported by

participants where meeting certain family members were delayed. Andrea mentioned that her mother knew, however her father did not, referencing an earlier comment in her interview: “Remember...I said that I wasn't allowed to date.” Denise had different experience, given that her then fiancé had children from previous marriages:

With his kids he was very (pause)...he felt very strongly about that, in a good way, what you know, like you would want it to be. So he had his oldest daughter and I, we all met for lunch. Now this was after, this wasn't just a "Hey, I'm dating."...we were definitely like, this is going to be...I think we were engaged. Anyway, so then he did have lunch with me, his other daughter, and son.

Birth Control. Alternatively, one couple mentioned not buying condoms or getting on birth control pills as a means to sustain abstinence, as Avery and Lisa mentioned:

You never had a condom, and I never had birth control pills. Like we never put ourselves in that, knowing situation where it was like, we're gonna have sex...

Yeah, we were never prepared to have sex.

Allowable behaviors and boundaries were implemented to ensure that their individual commitments to God to abstain from sex until marriage was honored and upheld as a couple. Other areas of abstention were implemented to ensure SA until marriage, or were beliefs about areas that should also be reserved until marriage.

Support

Having described the measures used for sustainability, as well as other areas of abstention, I will now move on to define the types and degrees of support received by the couples during their process of SA. These dominant themes are summarized in Table 8.

Table 8. Summary of Thematic Analysis: SA in Romantic Relationship: Support

Themes	<i>n</i>	Summary of Findings
"We held each other"	18	Participants reported that their main source of support was each other by: adhering to boundaries, reminding each other of common goal, communicating openly about each other's physical triggers.
Outside accountability	13	Some shared support or direct accountability from others. People who checked in on them, who were present as a boundary (i.e., sharing a hotel room), or friends who were also abstaining.
"God's Grace Kept Us": Divine assistance with SA	10	Participants shared a level of support they received from God, referred to as "God's grace". This ranged from the ability to sustain abstinence during weak moments, or an inner voice or feeling that encouraged them to not give in to temptation.
"Support? What Support"	10	At times participants did not feel supported, mentioning no one really "cheered them on" or overtly doubted they would sustain SA referenced as "naysayers."

"We held each other accountable." The sense of shared accountability amongst nine couples in terms of sustaining abstinence was prominent. For some, it was supporting each other during times of weakness. For instance, Avery shared how these moments occurred with his spouse: "Sometimes when I wanted to say, 'forget it', she'll do it, like a balance. If she was on some 'forget it', I'm like, 'Nah, come on. We...you just tripping right now.'" So, I feel like that really helped."

For others it was remembering the agreement they had made with God. As described by Ramon, "There were moments where we could have slipped, there was several moments. But we remember the promise, we remember the commitment that we made to Christ, individually and as a couple, and we wanted to fulfill that." A few other ways couples held each other accountable was to develop mantras for their relationship. Sayings such as "We are set apart," or "We have a call on our lives," as described by Roderick, who mentioned how setting mantras helped, "Just have to change your mindset from outcast to set apart."

If not a mantra, a general theme that emerged is that for the most part, partners were very respectful of each other, and if one was pushing the boundaries, the other would intervene right away. Moses gave an example:

There was a couple of times when I was leaving, I would kiss her bye, and I would try to take my hand and touch her somewhere, and she'd stop me, you know. I'd go, "Oh, okay. Okay. I'm sorry. I know. My mind, I lost my head for a minute."

Outside Accountability. When asked about others who supported them beyond themselves as a couple, thirteen participants were able to recollect having support during this time, mainly from friends or family who checked in on them, or who were praying for them during their courtship. Ramon shared,

There were moments where we felt like, well, it's literally us against the world, and we just gone fight together, regardless of who's rooting for us. So, once we realized that we had friends and relatives and people who, you know, came to know us, who were actually like, checking on us, like "How y'all doing? Y'all alright, y'all good?" You know, it encouraged us, and it pushed us to keep going. Even when we felt like, "Ya know what, all right. Come on, let's just do it."

Roderick, when asked to elaborate on his parents support, said, "It's not like they were accountability partners, but we did have praying parents." In contrast, Destiny had physical support from her friends or family, such as when she and her partner travelled, she brought someone along with her:

One of the things I think, which would be odd to other people from the outside looking in, was a time I went to Georgia, I went with my sister. And we stayed in the hotel

together for accountability. And then when I went to North Carolina, one of my mentors went with me and we stayed in a hotel together. And so that's one way that we kept it accountable.

Three participants mentioned having an example of couples who successfully abstained until marriage, and three couples said they had a couple that was practicing abstinence with them at the same time. Like Anthony described examples that really helped for him: "Meeting like real people, so couples and men that were waiting until marriage, like just makes its more tangible. Meeting other couples who had done...and they weren't like weird people."

"God's Grace Kept Us." A strong faith related theme emerged when participants were asked how they sustained abstinence. Although the majority of couples put measures in place such as allowable behaviors and boundaries, some participants in hindsight spoke of the controls that could have been "tighter" in a sense, and attributed their ability to continue to abstain as "God's Grace." For instance, one participant shared that his partner moved to his city to explore the relationship. Demetrius shared that deciding to move into the same apartment complex may not have been the best choice:

Listen, just kissing, being at my house at odd hours, at all hours of the night. Showers at my house. You taking showers, at my house? Oh, it wasn't good, sleeping in the same bed? It just wasn't a good look. It's the grace [of God]. Yeah. The grace and then, she was just very adamant about it.

For others, it was an inner feeling that facilitated the boundaries needed to abstain from sex until marriage. Like Aaliyah mentioned:

I just had a strong feeling that if we stepped outside of the boundaries that we had set for ourselves with God, that our relationship would not be the same...I feel like that was something that God was telling me. I can't even say that he would be my husband today.

“Support? What Support?” The lack of support at certain times was a response received when I asked about a support system outside of themselves, or God, while abstaining. Although many participants recalled having support, nine participants shared moments during their abstinence journey in which they did not feel supported. Three couples recalled having “naysayers,” feeling that others doubted their success. Some participants shared that others knew, but still didn’t feel encouraged, as Aaliyah described her friends and family who knew:

Like, they [siblings] know that's the choice that we made. His siblings know that's the choice that we made. But no one no one was like...cheering us on, like, “go ahead. Yay.” No one was really checking on us either.

Three participants elaborated that they really did not talk about their abstinence journey to others, either having a small circle of friends who already knew, no close friends around at that time who needed to know, or when shared, others would not believe them. For instance, Lisa shared her colleagues’ response when mentioning she was abstaining, “Yeah, you sleep in the same bed and y’all not having sex? Yeah right.”

Ramon shared how important it was in the beginning of their courtship, a time in which he did not feel supported:

One thing that we didn't hear a lot, especially in the beginning was, “You can actually do it.” Like you can have a thought of “I want to do this,” you can have a vision and have a

plan. But if you don't have that person, that cheerleader in your life to tell you, "You can actually do it." There is a, it's almost a standstill, you know.

In summary, this section has described the allowable behaviors and the boundaries implemented to honor their commitment to God, collectively as a couple. There were mixed themes in terms of support received. A few mentioned having outside accountability, examples of others who were abstaining or had abstained, with others having to rely on each other to sustain abstinence during their courtship period. There were some couples who recounted early on not feeling supported, and later had family and friends who prayed and cheered them on as they got closer to the finish line. Overall, through their relationship with God, participants did not feel alone, noting that God's grace "kept them" during this season.

Connections Between SA and Romantic Relationships

Turning now to the connection between SA and romantic relationships, I will begin by describing participants' perception on how sustaining abstinence influenced their dating relationship, by domain. These domains are summarized in Table 9. I will then follow with a detailed description of their expectations for marriage after abstention, and whether they perceived that those expectations were met, in terms of marital and sexual satisfaction.

Table 9. Summary of Thematic Analysis: Connection Between SA and Relationships

Themes	n	Summary of Findings
Relational Domain		
Communication	14	Communication grew while abstaining, helped with being direct with intentions, sharing expectations, healthy ways handle disagreements or address sexual frustrations.
Friendship	14	Several couples "started as friends," expressing a genuine friendship early on that was strengthened while practicing SA.

Table 9. *Continued*

Themes	n	Summary of Findings
Pace	12	Participants shared that SA set a good pace, the ability to mature and grow with partner, allowed personal growth into a suitable spouse for marriage. Also expressed as moving in the same direction at the same time.
Trust & togetherness	8	SA fostered trust, a sense of togetherness and knowing partner upon marriage.
Other Domains		
Financial	14	Participants expressed having more money while abstaining: by not spending on meaningless dates, or in an effort to impress someone.
Psychological	10	SA fostered clarity and self-discipline which prepared them to abstain with partner.
Spiritual	7	Participants shared their relationship with God was strengthened, clarity in hearing God's voice, ability to lean on God during challenges with SA.

Participants were asked about how abstaining from sex until marriage influenced their relationship, in terms of pros and cons, or advantages and disadvantages. They were also asked what other domains may have influenced them individually, such as psychologically, physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

Relational Domain

Communication: “We talked. All the time. About everything.” The frequency and depth of communication was a dominant theme expressed among all ten couples. Specifically, the boundaries and dating practices set in place to abstain from sex until marriage allowed for strengthened communication between the couples. Seven couples expressed how they talked about many different things early on in their relationship. Andrea mentioned,

We'd start talking about the sky or classes, and then it will dive into like, “Well, what do you see yourself doing in ten years? And like, what about family?” And I'm like, how do we even get to that point from the start of the conversation (laughter).

Others expressed how transparent and direct they were with each other about their intentions on dating. As Anthony described when asking his then friend to date, “I was like, ‘Hey, I like you, I think you're a great candidate for marriage. I would like to date you, essentially. What's up?’”

Two couples, who reconnected years after first dating, this time without sex being involved. Warren shared how communication appeared in their relationship the second time around in different ways:

I was literally asking questions like, how do you spend money? Why do you spend money the way you do? What influences you? How have your parents influenced your spending habits? And when in fact, you're like, these are questions we asked when we were dating because we weren't trying to go to those other conversations. Like, what kind of underwear are you wearing? Like, we weren't going there.

For the other couple who reconnected, Tracy explained how things were different this go around:

I think it [SA] really taught us how to just be creative in enjoying our time together, as opposed to leaning on what we would generally do...it really teaching us how to communicate, how we feel and what we need, especially when one of us was more frustrated than [the] other sexually. We just had to really communicate. “This is what's going on with me.” Walk each other through it. So that, that was very impactful.

Other couples shared how communication helped them work through challenges during their relationship, or to develop healthy ways to communicate with each other, in general, and to discuss their expectations for marriage.

Friendship: “We started as friends.” The second dominant theme in the relational category concerned friendship. Seven couples began their love story as “We started off as friends.” These friendships ranged from six months to three years, with an average length of friendship prior to partnering of 1.5 years. Three couples were purposely not dating at the time they met their now spouse, as Destiny mentioned after breaking from a toxic relationship, “We really were friends, you know, and in my mind...I kept saying is, like, “I just don't want to date.” Anthony explained that God told him specifically not to date for two years. He met his wife while hanging out in a friend group:

That process of just being around people and observing. And so yeah, I got to know my wife within that. God was kind of, just showing me people's character, and she was the only one that stood up within that community of people...even more so, I was drawn to her, more so than just having great character, but like, I was drawn to her personality, and the type of friend that she was.

For all couples who started as friends, whether they intended to date or not, their time as friends set a tone early on, allowing for intimate moments even before becoming romantically involved. As Andrea shared,

We hung out and we just became really, really, I would say, intimate in the sense of just sharing our stories, sharing our fears and things like that. And it just became something so natural for us, as friends, to just talk about the stuff that was bothering us or stuff that we were going through, you know, he was very easy, very easy to talk to, you know, and so we, we just became like family very, very quickly.

For the majority of these couples, the transition from friends to dating was seamless, as Denise mentioned, “We had our first date and it was the easiest date I ever had in my life. It was so, none of the, I don't know, it was just, none of the weirdness like ‘Ooh what's going to happen?’ It was just, it was so...comfortable.” As discussed in a previous section, by the time that the couples decided to connect, their stance of SA was already determined due to the previous conversations that took place.

Ironically, the other three couples, who did not start as friends, described a similar level of intimacy that developed due to SA, with the biggest factor being communication that fostered a great friendship. Many of the couples attributed other relational processes, such as getting to know one another, learning about healthy relationship and growth with a partner, that was attributed to setting a good pace.

Pace: “It slowed us down.” The pace of their relationship was a less dominant theme. Six couples mentioned that SA allowed for them to get to know each other on a deeper level, and the ability to establish a level of closeness that was attributed to the pace of their relationship. As Freeman mentioned, “If we were fornicating, I don’t think we will be close to where we are now.” Although Freeman and his spouse did not date long, a similar sentiment was shared among couples who partnered early in life and had a longer courtship. As Aaliyah shared of her eight-year dating period,

I think that, I think it just helped us slow down. And I think that it helped us to mature and grow together for where we were at that stage, or whatever, because we've literally been together since we were kids. And so like, being able to grow with someone, I think is a special thing.

In contrast, for the six participants who partnered or reconnected later in life, with a shorter courtship period, the reference to “pace,” was not expressed as slow or fast. The emphasis was on moving in the same direction, at the same time. Moses explained,

Of course, she hadn't been married at all. And, and so I told her, “Well, I'm not gonna give you no long courtship, nothing like that. I know what I want. I know what I'm looking for. And you seem to fit,” you know? And she said, “Well, I'm 40 something myself and I'm not looking for no long courtship either.” So, it look like we both got to the same direction, you know, and so...we agreed that we wouldn't have no two- or three-year courtship and all that stuff. We knew what we wanted.

Demetrius explains pace, but did not feel it was attributed to SA:

Our lives were running parallel. So we were going in the same direction. We had the same vision and mission. We came together to get married. So yeah, it [SA] didn't push it. So we weren't rushing to like, get to the altar just because we were abstinent. Yeah, we were on track. We had a, we had a plan. So it really it didn't change anything. It's who we were before we came in. We just walked together doing it at that point.

Communication, friendship and pace were the main relational processes that occurred during their dating periods. Other relational domains were mentioned such as closeness, a sense of knowing, and trust. Additional domains were also explored, and since they were small in comparison to the relational influence, they will be briefly reported next.

Other Domains

Financial. An influence in the financial domain was mentioned by fourteen participants, some indicating that their finances were influenced while abstaining by spending less money

than they did when not. For instance, Freeman mentioned, "I've given women money, done things for them. It wasn't really an investment for the future, so I lost money in it." As Mia shared how she "did more" financially in previous relationships while not abstaining:

Spending money, like trying to make the other person like me. Or like make them happy...maybe not like paying for stuff, but just focus on the relationship...spending extra money on my hair, or clothes, or travel. And then, things were different with Anthony. I was more centered, and I knew my value and I felt secure and how he felt about me. I didn't feel the need to like, do extra.

Aaliyah shared how her partner having more income while dating was beneficial and also helped their relationship:

We were like 19 years old. So like, usually that's the "broke college student, low on money" period. [For us], we were going out to eat, trying new restaurants and doing things like that. We were able to do that...[because] on his time, he was working. So, I think that's kind of like an important pastime kind of thing.

Psychological. An additional domain mentioned by ten individuals were psychological aspects, including: mental clarity, focus and determination, and self-control. As Destiny shared, "So really, in that time period of abstinence. It wasn't hard for me to you know, "do me" because I wasn't really tied to anything, you know? Um, so yeah, so physically and mentally, definitely clear-headed."

Other participants described how they became focused and determined to practice abstinence. As Roderick described, "The desire was still there, like Savannah's beautiful, you

know? But it's just exercising self-control in times where I felt weak... and [if] I felt like it kind of went far like, like refocusing.”

Spiritual. Lastly, spirituality emerged yet again, when asked how abstinence influenced the couples’ courtship. As discussed in the “Relationship with God” section, seven participants noted that SA strengthened their spirituality, but in this regard, spoke of it more in terms of “leaning on God” to get them through the period of SA. As described by Warren, who often joked in his responses:

Anybody who's, who's been raised up with a spiritual aspect, no matter what they believe, knows that they have to tap into that spiritual side in order to stay spiritually sound. Like you talk to God more than you probably have in life, like those drives home...dropping her off, “Lord, listen Jesus, listen, like, I know you know all things, that you are in all places, so you already know I need you to come through for me (laughter).”

In summary, several different domains were mentioned in terms of how SA until marriage influenced their relationship. The dominant theme was in the relational domain, specifically: communication, friendship and pace. Components of the psychological domain emerged such as clarity of mind, focus and self-control. Lastly, less dominant themes were mentioned, such as finances, spending less money while abstaining, and a spiritual component, a reliance and need to “lean” on God during the difficult process of abstaining from sex until marriage. The next section will focus on how this phenomenon influenced their marriage.

Connection Between SA and Marriage

Early on, participants were asked their opinion of the pros and cons of their experience while abstaining from sex until marriage. After several participants repeatedly said, “There were no cons,” I began to lead this part of the interview with a question that was originally meant to “probe” this subject. In subsequent individual interviews, participants were asked, “What did you expect to happen if you successfully abstained until marriage, and were those expectations met?” A second question was asked “What happened that you did not expect?” During the couple interview, participants were asked “What impact did SA have on your now marriage, in terms of marital and sexual satisfaction?” This afforded the opportunity for couples to elaborate on their expectations and the overall influence that SA had on their marriage. A consensus of these discussions is summarized in Table 10 and described next.

Table 10. Summary of Thematic Analysis: Perceived Costs and Benefits of SA until Marriage

Themes	<i>n</i>	Summary of Findings
Marital expectations and perceived influence		
The expected: "God will bless our marriage"	12	The expectation to have an easier marriage than if they had not abstained or commitment from their spouse in marriage.
The unexpected: Infertility and pregnancy-related Issues	4	Two couples shared that they did not expect to have issues with fertility or pregnancy (i.e., stillborn birth), especially after practicing SA.
The influence: "A marriage built on a strong foundation"	20	The influence of SA was that their expectations for marriage were achieved, that SA during their relationship, helped create a marriage built on a solid foundation of a) commitment, b) communication and c) God.
"Our marriage is different"	14	Some couples felt their marriage seemed easier by experiencing less severe problems (i.e., infidelity), that they communicated better, and held their marriage and sex life sacred, and did not expect divorce due their covenant with God.
"Our marriage is sacred"	4	Some couples felt that SA influenced their marriage by making it "sacred," by being dedicated to a lifelong relationship with spouse, or slightly different, by not talking openly about their sex life.

Table 10. *Continued*

Themes	<i>n</i>	Summary of Findings
Sexual expectations and perceived influence		
The expected: "Make up for lost time"	16	The expectation was that God would bless their sex life, specifically, good in quality and frequency, or sex like "in the movies.
The unexpected: Lack of support	14	Participants did not feel supported in terms of preparedness for sex after abstention or couples who could help who had a similar experiences.
"The switch didn't turn on"	10	The inability to shift their thinking about sex, "sex is bad" to "sex is good within marriage". Or females inability to find their "sexy".
"Good sex is NOT automatic!"	10	Others shared that they were unaware of an "adjustment" or "discovery" period, or that it was unrealistic to think great sex would happen automatically.
Comparison	7	For most men, challenges came from comparing spouse to previous sexual partners. Women wondered if they were "enough," compared to their spouse's past partners. Virgins expressed that having no one to compare their spouse to serve as a buffer to initial dissatisfaction.
Sexual trauma	3	Three female participants attributed their sexual challenges to trauma they had experienced prior to marriage.
The influence: "Sex gets better with time"	14	Couples shared that sex either naturally got better over time, or after getting more comfortable or exploring each other sexually.
"Sexual freedom"	12	Participants shared a sense of freedom in their sex lives, in terms of fidelity, trust, and vulnerability to explore each other.
"Sex as connection"	10	Described among couples as the role sex plays in their marriage; to connect spiritually and emotionally with spouse. An experience beyond just the physical "act" of sex.
The overall lived experience of SA until marriage		
"Worth the wait"	20	When asked if they would do anything differently, most said they wouldn't change anything about their experience.
A greater influence	20	Couples considered themselves "the example" of SA until marriage, often sought after for advice from family, friends, churches, and their community. Many couples also expressed pride in defying the odds, the ability to share their experience, and to have set a good example for their children and future children.

Marital Expectations and Perceived Influence

The Expected: "God will bless our Marriage." A theme that emerged among six couples was that they expected to have God's "grace and favor," and that their marriage would be "blessed." For two participants, this expectation was framed as God would "honor" their marriage because of their obedience of reserving sex until marriage. For instance, Demetrius

mentioned, “God was going to favor us because of our obedience. And because of us realizing that, you know, there was so much in store for us if we just waited, if we just did it His way.”

Renaë expressed her expectation slightly differently:

My expectation really was to just walk in that way before God, and just say he would be pleased with it and that he would bless our union. Just that it [our marriage] would be based upon Godly principles, that it wouldn’t be anything that was generated out of lust, or that we would, you know, have the wrong motives going into this marriage or anything like that. So, that is one thing that I expected. Even in my marriage currently, I expect that to still be the center of it. I expect my husband to be here, to be faithful, and to be committed; and those things, we are doing. It is currently working. Even through tough times of disagreement and everything.

Two couples expected to have an easier relationship and to break generational curses. Anthony elaborated on his statement, “I expected that our marriage should be easier, not easier than it is now, but just easier than what it would have been if we did not abstain.” While Tracy explained what she meant by “easier” is that “It [our marriage] would be different from my, my experience...it would be different than others.”

In terms of generational curses to be broken, Mia reflected on her expectation to break the cycle by not being a pregnant bride, a pattern that she had seen in her immediate family, “I just wanted to change that. Even for my kids for them to at least have an example [of a couple who abstained].” In the same vein, an expectation to “marry their spouse,” that their “family would be blessed,” and to be “married forever” were also mentioned. For example, Avery expressed,

My first, my expectation for not having sex, was to marry Lisa. That was one of my expectations. That meant, like, if I'm doing this with this girl, then you know there's gonna be, this is gonna be my wife.

With participants being asked about their expectations for marriage, themes emerged on marital issues or concerns that were not expected. These experiences are covered next.

The Unexpected: Infertility. Although less dominant, this theme did emerge among the participants and was clearly identified as a marital challenge that couples did not expect. Two couples presented challenges with infertility. For instance, Lisa shared that their first son was stillborn:

I expected to have kids easier because I didn't want kids before a certain age, or before a certain time. And then, when I did want kids, I had a (pause), you know, trauma occur to me, and I'm like, "Well, what was the abstaining for?"

Her husband Avery shared a similar sentiment in his interview:

I got hit with reality when our first son died. And so, it was when we had our stillbirth. I was I like, "So God, what's up? Like, hey, so what's the point? Yeah, I mean, what's all the hoopla about it?"

Another couple shared how they were still experiencing challenges with infertility during their couple interview. Destiny expressed, "The only thing I do regret is not trying to conceive the first year. That's probably my only regret." Her husband, Warren, had a different outlook on their challenges with infertility:

I literally think like, that has no bearing on what God could do. So the fact that we have not conceived is because He [God] said He's not ready for us to conceive. He may, He

may say, you're not going to. Now, we're hoping that's not the case. So, I don't think at that time (pause), and again, we would have been different people, you know. Who would say that we'd be sitting where we are right now, with the benefits and the blessings and the things that we have. If we didn't, if we were to continue [without children], not to say that's a blessing in itself. But it also is a life altering blessing.

The Influence: "A Marriage Built on a Strong Foundation." A strong foundation for marriage is the predominant theme that emerged among participants. In the previous section on expectations for marriage, couples expressed that they expected for God to bless their marriage and to have an easier marriage based on the relationship processes (communication, friendship and trust) that were developed while abstaining. For all couples, these expectations were met, predominantly expressed by the "foundation" that the practice of SA built for their marriage. Although all couples expressed that their marriage was satisfying due to the foundation that it was built upon, the mechanisms used that comprised this foundation varied slightly when describing the influence of their marriage, versus what they expected prior to getting married.

Foundation of Commitment. Commitment was expressed by seven couples as having an influence on their marital expectations. Commitment included the level of devotion that their spouses had to their marriage, as well as their partner's level of safety and trust within the marriage. Two participants gave examples of how the commitment to abstain assisted with committing to their spouse, post marriage. Nathaniel shared,

It [temptation] didn't knock me off. I knew where I was going. I knew what I had at home. I knew that I was going to cherish it and I was going to respect it. Um, and to this day has still. Yeah, I don't have a problem.

Denise expressed a female's perspective of how SA influenced their foundation of commitment:

I guess, seeing his wife having waited, knows and understands that there is a measure, obviously a measure of discipline that I had to exercise. And I feel like that brings a certain level of trust into the marriage knowing that you know, she, she's not somebody who just was flying off the handle all before, so it brings place of, so we understand because, well, we understand what it takes.

Foundation of Communication. Expressed by six couples, a marriage built on communication was often attributed to the types of conversations they had prior to getting married, which provided realistic expectations once married. As Warren mentioned,

So when we reconnected, this was the person who I was talking to, all the time. About my good days, about my bad days, about my feelings, about what sucked about my boss, about my friends, and like, we begin to really know each other triggers in that courtship and what bothers the person, and what doesn't bother them. So we didn't make the same mistakes in our marriage.

Most couples attributed the foundation of communication as an advantage to the ability and the manner in which they handled problems. Aaliyah shared, comparing to other relationships she has observed,

And so like, you're getting that [sex], but you're ignoring everything else that can kind of come along with it. Like, we just didn't really have that. I think that we were able to learn how to communicate and talk things through with each other a lot better.

Demetrius shared a similar account:

So our marriage has gone through many phases. Ups, downs, ins, outs, highs and lows.

So where we are now, is relearning, because we're new people. And many don't experience what we've been through. So what we have to do now is sit back and say okay, "Now, who are you? Who am I? How can we be friends? How can we be sexually connected?"

Foundation built on God. Spiritual themes emerged as the bases of their "strong foundation" in marriage, which is not surprising given these were key components shared that influenced their courtship. Destiny summed up the benefit of having a strong foundation, as she explained her marriage built on God: "You know, when that's your foundation, when that's the foundation of your courtship, then that is the foundation of your marriage." For instance, Savannah added when explaining that her expectations for marriage were exceeded, "I made a really sound decision. It wasn't all emotions, so that's really clear and still stands out... when I look at who he is, and who I am, and how God put us together." Avery described it as being "equally yoked":

I don't want to sound like I'm super like "Bible Bible" but ...this is why you have to be equally yoked. Because when your core systems are different, you're going to react to stuff in different ways. When your core is the same, somebody could be solid. And so I

feel like I could be solid for Lisa. And we've been like that all our life, we've been balanced. So when I'm down, she's up, and when I'm up, she can be down.

Demetrius explained what a strong foundation meant for their marriage and why this was important.

I think the reason for *why* [emphasis added] we were abstinent, has played an impact in how we've survived...some of the things we've been through [in marriage]. So, because we were so devoted to Christ, that was like, that was the foundation of why we did it. That spoke to, that impacted how we move forward, because we were doing it because we love Christ. It wasn't some *thing* [emphasis added] we were doing, it wasn't like a 90-day challenge.

“Our Marriage Is Different.” The perception that their marriage was different from others was a theme that emerged when reflecting on how SA influenced their overall marriage. Seven couples admitted to experiencing marital problems but often noted that their marriage was “different” than the couples around them or what they observed in their households while growing up. Some felt that their marriage was easy compared to others, like Warren mentioned “Life has been tough in this first five years, our marriage hasn't ...all I can attribute that to is God and the courtship, and the relationship that we built before getting married.” Anthony shared his “easier marriage” slightly differently:

I think our relationship has been easier than it could be. I think it'll be a lot harder. I think the issues that I see are just what I would think of just like sanctification stuff, God just pulling stuff out and then...we have to work it out. And then all the different nuances of like children or work or just those kind of things.

For some, their issues didn't surface until the COVID-19 pandemic, as Avery detailed new financial concerns:

I guess the latest is Corona, right. So we're making money on Broadway. Well, she's making money on Broadway. I quit my job to be with [the baby]. And now our source of income is completely over. And we also don't know when we're going back...because of the field that she's in. And so it's kind of like...we're living as if we did have sex before marriage. She's in school, I'm at her mama house, so this is another thing that just happened...it's gonna be interesting. We will see how it turns out.

Aaliyah shared that the pandemic reduced the expected family support after having her first child, "Like I literally had her a week, a week before COVID became like a real thing. That was five months ago. Yeah. So that was a very stressful."

A few other couples shared that their marriages were different since they did not experience the types of challenges others did—specifically, infidelity and heartache, as Destiny shared having to console a friend with her marital challenges:

It was a lot of infidelity...before and after she had their child...I feel like because maybe that [sex] was something that was a huge priority for them, that may have influence on the challenges that they faced in their marriage.

Alternatively, Moses shared his current marriage was different than previous marriages, in terms of infidelity.

I had sexual activities prior to both of those. In one of them. I'm trying to think... one, I know, *during* the marriage I had sex out of marriage, sexual activities. But what makes this one different was the fact that, it had the new beginning. It had the type of

beginning of the abstinence figure being present in it, and so it was entered...under different... on the different understanding in my head and under different promises to myself, and my belief factor, that it didn't really take...it didn't really take out of marriage sexual activities to be involved.

“Our marriage is sacred.” Holding their marriage sacred was one last way in which four couples described SA influence on their marriage. As described by Savannah,

I've heard of couples who just, it's no big deal. They talk about like, all their different sexual experiences, whether it's with the person they ended up married to, or before, like people they've dated...to our walk with the Lord and like our prayer life together and individually, like, the intimacy that comes with sex is like extremely sacred and amazing if it's like, treated correctly. And I think because we did choose to, like actively struggle through, you know, making the decision to be abstinent and wait for marriage, it puts a sacred, you know, covering on that, I think, would not be there if we didn't have that.

Put differently, two couples said their marriage was forever, based on their commitment with God, which also made their marriage sacred. As Nathaniel described, “You know, marriage, we're one and done...we talked about that years before we got married, like, there's no chance, like I don't need a prenup because I know what God says about marriage and I don't plan to test that.”

Overall, couples perceived that abstaining from sex until marriage positively influenced their marriage in terms of establishing a strong foundation, a marriage built on commitment, communication and God, as well as confirmation that they made an informed, God-led decision

on whom to marry. Given these affirmative results, an unexpected theme that occurred was that these same sentiments were not equally expressed in terms of sexual expectations in marriage.

Sexual Expectations and Perceived Influence

The Expected: “Make up for lost time.” Making up for lost time was a concept that was expressed among half of the participants. Their expectations for sex after abstinence was that the quality, frequency and experience of sex with their partner would be worth the time lost from not having sex during abstinence. The most dominant theme is that their sex life would be “perfect” or “amazing,” like you see “in the movies,” meaning that they would have sex frequently and enjoy sex with their partner. Simply stated by Avery, “Another expectation...is that sex is going to feel good or is going to be great.” A more elaborate explanation of this expectation was provided by Destiny:

I would say what my expectation...[sex] would be what we see in movies, you know? I mean, like, it would be this grand thing and, you know, there would be just so much honor for waiting and that the sexual experience would just be like fireworks and all that. All the things that you see in like, you know, movies, media and what have you. I think that was probably my level of expectation.

Five participants expected that their wedding night would be special. Denise shared the scene she played in her head repeatedly before her wedding night:

It played in my mind, and that scene was my wedding night. Oh, wow. I had a choreographed dance. I had this beautiful white, floaty negligée and I was gonna...I had all this like conscious level and a subconscious level. So that was an expectation...he's

gonna be like, crying, because I'm giving him this gift. Angels would sing and everything (laughter).

Similarly, four participants shared that they expected that God would bless their sexual relationship as well, like Savannah shared, “If you have a relationship with the Lord, you know that it's, it's very real the rewards that you reap from obeying Him.”

There were a few differences in the sexual expectations reported of virgin participants that were not mentioned in non-virgins. For instance, virgins reported an expectation not to have any children before marriage or contract any STDs and hoped to satisfy their partner, as Andrea recalled her thoughts before marriage, “I wanted to, I just want him to be okay with me. I want him to be satisfied. I want him to like I was enough.” In contrast, three participants who were non-virgins had three distinctly different expectations, related to their sexual past. One female participant expected that sex would be better with her partner once married, since they had never had sex. In contrast, Freeman, a non-virgin participant expected the opposite, that his partner wouldn't be “too wild” since she was a virgin. Roderick, gave an in-depth account of his opposing expectation:

I knew that, like, I had a sexual past. And knew like, there was some things that were some strongholds [guilt from having sex] in my life in regard to that, so I guess my expectation was, in being abstinent, like those things would break [go away]. Those would no longer be an issue.

During both the dyadic and couple interviews, couples were asked if their sexual expectations had been met, and to elaborate on how they perceived SA influenced their marriage, in terms

of their sexual relationship. The themes that were derived from these reports are in the section that follows.

The Unexpected: Sexual (Dis)satisfaction. A dominant theme that was not expected to emerge is that sexual dissatisfaction was experienced once married, in all couples. There were specific reasons given for this dissatisfaction.

“The Switch Didn’t Turn from Off to On.” A common expression among five participants who noted that the switch from “sex is bad” to “sex is good in marriage” did not automatically turn on for them. Many participants attributed this challenge to the messages received about abstinence from the church and even their parents. Aaliyah provided an example of these messages:

I've grown up in the church, like all of my life. And so people are telling you to be abstinent until marriage, and “don't have sex.” But they don't necessarily teach you like, how to be like, sexy. Like, how do you, how do you embrace that part of yourself as a woman and still be Godly?

Roderick explained that the switch didn’t turn on for him, possibly by what his parents shared about SA: I always associated sex with “bad.” “Sex equals bad,” so you don't do it. I don't think my parents ever taught me like the sex in marriage part of it.

Although only five participants reported this as an issue for them, their partners also expressed this as an initial concern in their marriage, thus experienced sexual dissatisfaction early on. For instance, Nathaniel shared how his wife had to “tap into her sexy” before sex,

Being completely frank, that is a bit frustrating at times. Especially you know, now is you know, things are kind of like “rush rush.” She likes the whole like setting and things like

that. And it's really hard to attain you know, with you know, you got however much time the dictator [8-month-old daughter] who will stay down. You don't know what that looks like.

Savannah explained how she dealt with her spouse's issues in turning on the switch.

So it was a journey. I mean, we're married almost six years now. And I want to say the first two years was an adjustment to him being fully, like, open to being just, completely vulnerable, sexually. Like I mean, just walking around naked and all. Like that stuff didn't just happen.

“Good sex is NOT automatic.” The need to work at having good sex was an emerging theme as participants began to retell their experience with sex after abstaining. Five couples shared that they were unaware of an “adjustment” or a “discovery” period that would occur with their spouse. Moses shared,

I used to think that she would try to do things or appeared to me to be more knowledgeable about sex than she really was. And I used to think it wasn't necessary...it didn't have to be...“come here, let me see how much you know”...it was a path that we were beginning to go down together. Anything would have been fine.

Others explained that their expectations for sex were unrealistic, similarly to how Tracy described her sexual expectations:

Very unrealistic or naïve. Everybody's telling you “if you abstain, it's such a wonderful thing,” which it is. But it doesn't mean automatically. You know, like I said, you're not gonna have this wonderful, “Everything's gonna be in place” sex life. I wish more people would talk about that.

Comparison. Comparison was the second dominant theme. Although seven couples expressed some type of comparison with their spouse, there was a notable difference in how this theme was expressed, resulting in several divergent patterns. Virgin women married to non-virgin men compared themselves to their spouses' previous lovers, for instance, Renae, a virgin at time of marriage, explained, "They might have been sexually active before they met you. And so, sometimes that can put you in a feeling, intimidating space where like..." "Am I okay?" Denise, described comparison on her wedding night:

The other thing that was hard for me is I knew Moses had a lot of experience, a lot, not just because he'd been married before, but a whole lot, so that was problematic.

Like...that was a problem for me. To know that he'd had a lot of women and I just was like... I wasn't looking for a virgin. You know what I mean? Like I wasn't expecting that, or that wasn't something that was important to me. But it just, I think just added, i don't know... i was just all over the place that night.

Non-virgin men and women compared their current spouse to previous lovers. Warren's concern with comparing his spouse to previous partners after marriage,

I've been with a person who does *this* a lot. Or was out there willing to try *this*, or a person who's always wanting to do *this*, and you have all these things that you've experienced and you're like, "Oh, because I've experienced this, this is what it should be like when you marry somebody." And then they're [spouse] is like, "I'm tired, I'm going to sleep." So you're like, "What?"

Demetrius compared sex with his spouse before abstinence, and now after:

When we were together before, we weren't, we were unbelievers...so we smoked a lot. We smoked weed; we drank a lot. So I think that changed some of the dynamics because the guards were down. Now that we are saved, more clear. Now it's, she's not...she's more guarded than I thought she would be.

Mia expressed,

So I heard like "oh, sex is better." I think that may be true if I had never had sex before. But I don't know that to be true. I don't know. I'm still, I don't know about that at this point. Like, if our sex is better now, because we didn't have it before, or if that is true if neither one of us had ever had it before, you know?

Coincidentally, the three virgin couple groups expressed comparison, or lack of, as a buffer to their sexual challenges. For instance, Jordan shared,

She hasn't been with anybody else. You know, like, that's everything. I haven't been with anybody else. We don't have so much sexual experience outside of each other, that we see it as an option to really venture outside of our marriage...so it's just, there are less options.

Andrea shared her initial apprehension around sex after marriage, "I think I wanted to make sure that I was good. You know that he was satisfied, too. And I think it helps to not have anyone to compare, you know, ourselves too."

Trauma. Although a less dominant theme, previous trauma had occurred with three female participants who expressed that those events influenced their sex life with their partner. Destiny explained how previous trauma affected sex on their honeymoon:

Every time we would try, it wouldn't happen, because I was just so... [long pause]. Now, because I'm older, and I can like, I help women go through certain things, and I can see it, I can now identify it as trauma. And my 35-year-old self is looking at my 20-year-old-self saying, "You should have sat with therapists," You know what I mean? To unpack all of that.

Although an extreme case, one couple shared a recent self-diagnosis that influenced their ability to consummate their marriage. Addison explained,

I felt like I could do, I could do intercourse. Like you know, through whatever this pain was that I'm going to experience, like the breaking of the hymen, and all that kind of stuff...for the pleasure, because that person is going to make me want to do it. When it wasn't that...(long pause). I didn't, for a long time, I didn't know that it was vaginismus.

Her husband, Jacob, elaborated during his interview:

I don't mean to be this way about it, but it was a real mood killer. You know, you could, we could be in the middle of doing something and just, the attempt to have sex could ruin the whole mood, basically.

A natural follow up question to these negative experiences was "How have you been able to manage these challenges?" One common theme among participants was lack of support, followed by how SA and their marriage helped during these challenging times.

Lack of Support. The lack of support and preparation for sex after SA was a theme regarding some contributing factors to the sexual dissatisfaction that these abstaining couples experienced. Seven couples expressed a lack of preparation for sex and lack of support once married, with participants both with and without sexual history. A consensus among virgin

participants was that no one talked to them about the process of losing their virginity or sex thereafter. As Lisa described, “The expectation is that you know what you're doing. And you know, I remember getting really sick. I was like, ‘Oh my gosh, am I allergic to semen?’, I'm freaking out. My throat...they don't tell you anything.”

Jacob shared his experience getting advice early on, only left him feeling like others couldn't relate:

I went out to lunch with [a friend] and he was giving me romantic advice, telling me like how to pleasure a woman, right? And he was all like, “[If] you do *that*? [It'll be like] no other man has touched her before.” I was like, “Ironically, we saved ourselves for marriage, so every touch is like that.”

The Influence: Evolving Sexual Satisfaction. Despite the challenges faced early on, nine couples expressed that their sex life has evolved into a component of their marriage that is satisfying. This influence of sexual satisfaction was expressed in several ways.

“Sex gets better with time.” The idea that sex improved over time in their marriage was a theme expressed by eight couples. Denise shared that her wedding night did not begin as planned, however, ended on a memorable note.

He puts our stuff down, he starts looking at the snacks and I was thinking, ummmm? So then, the [man] turns the TV on. So I am like, WHAT?!? He turns on the football game.

Now, I like football, but not on my wedding night.

After explaining that she decided that her partner was also nervous, she recounted on the rest of the evening: He just made it a beautiful (pause), it was like, I literally cried. And I was like “Lord, it was worth it.”

Other participants continued to share their stories about sexual expectations and how “great” and “frequent sex” did not happen overnight. Savannah explained their evolution of sexual satisfaction that occurred over time:

Initially, it grows. Like I think people have this notion that you get married, and it is supposed to be, boom, you're connected like that. But I think the longer we've been married, about to be married six years this month, the longer we've been married, the better sex has gotten.

“Sexual Freedom.” Another theme regarding sexual satisfaction in marriage, after abstention, is a sense of sexual freedom. Six couples shared that they felt “free” in their sex life, in terms of fidelity, confidence that their spouse wouldn’t cheat, and the freedom to explore each other sexually. This sense of freedom and connection was experienced by participants in different ways, for instance Mia shared,

Him being able to be faithful to God and His standards, shows...that he can be faithful to me in marriage, because it's like, if you're not faithful before marriage, what's going to keep you faithful in marriage?

Avery expressed freedom slightly different in his marriage:

We could learn from each other. You know, I don't have to feel uncomfortable not knowing what to do. Because I can experience this with you, could be like, “Yo, I really didn't like that.” Or “remember what you did?” You know? It's kind of like, that's a good pro, where it's not even like judgment. It's like, learning.

A form of sexual freedom, expressed by virgin participants and their spouses, was not having another person to compare their spouse to. For instance, Ramon described:

“We are grateful that we waited you know, we have no one to compare ourselves to.”

Explained slightly different from Freeman’s perspective, “I’ve never been with a virgin, um knowing that, you know, I’m the only one, she can’t visualize somebody else when she’s with me.”

“Sex as Connection.” Lastly, a final theme shared among five couples is that sex is a form of connection, where some called it a “spiritual” experience. As Demetrius described his first time after SA, “It was definitely worship our first time. Like I spoke in tongues... it felt like worship.” Mia shared how she feels connected with her husband sexually: “Like, he’s genuinely wanting to connect with me, and not only looking at me sexually. Because I know he chose me, not because we had sex or, you know, for the sex.”

Although all participants shared that they may have experienced sexual dissatisfaction initially, the consensus was that, overall, that sex was not the cornerstone, that satisfaction developed over time, and that the sexual freedom and connection that came along with their marriage, added to this process. As summed up by Andrea, “I definitely would say that my expectations were met and exceeded because it just, it really was something different...or is...I should say, not was, but is.”

In the final part of the interview, participants were asked if they had a choice to “do it all over again, would they still choose to abstain from sex until marriage?” The themes that emerged from the interviews represented a summary view of their experience. I will conclude the reporting of findings in this section.

The Overall Lived Experience of SA Until Marriage

“Worth the Wait.” All 20 participants reported that if they could do it all again, they would still choose abstinence. Some participants explained it in a simple, affirmative tone, for example Savannah’s response: “Like I definitely don’t regret it at all. I would do that all over again.” Or as plainly put by Lisa, “I would do some things differently in my life, but not this.” Others were more elaborate in their answer, like Moses mentioned, “But as far as choice and selection and, and being granted what I prayed for to happen in the abstinence, it’s, it’s been (long pause) it’s been very satisfactory.”

Others shared how they thought that without SA, they wouldn’t have gotten married to their spouse. As Andrea shared, “Definitely [would still choose SA]. Like knowing who I was before. I feel like had [sex] been another aspect of our relationship, it definitely would have been weaponized by me.”

In terms of the sexual challenges that emerged, Avery’s elaboration represented the perspective of many others:

So, our marriage is so much more than this, that one thing [sex]. We were good at everything else. I mean, we're good at communicating. We were good at being friends with each other. I was good at supporting [my wife], she was good at supporting me. We listen to each other, like stuff like that. We were already good at this. So we didn't really have to learn that on the way. Like, we had already learned all that other stuff, so we just have to learn one more thing.

“Sex is not the Cornerstone.” Is a theme described by eight couples that sex was not the most important thing in their marriage; in part because sex, or physical attraction, was not

the driving force in their union. For instance, Destiny explained, “I really feel that the period of abstinence really helped us to realize, like sex is not the number one component in our relationship.” Or how Anthony describes sex in his marriage, “For me, as I see marriage, like sex is a part of an entire ecosystem of something, but the ecosystem does not hinge upon that one facet of it.” Denise tied in a spiritual component to her depiction of how sex is not the cornerstone:

For us, sex is not the glue that keeps us together. God is the glue that keeps us together. That's a fringe benefit. And it's important, but it's not...I think that's what helps it keep in perspective. I know that God's called us together, and I've made a commitment to that covenant.

Another way this theme was expressed is by Warren,

Through that journey of being abstinent, we built a really good foundation, a really good sense of communication that I think was necessary for a successful marriage. Um, so I personally feel that, you know, the way that it's impacted us, is that it's not like the driving force of our marriage.

A Greater Influence. The concluding theme shared among all participants was that their abstinence journey was “not about them.” All 10 couples expressed that they were now “the example” of the couple who abstained, for family members, friends, church members, even their community. Part of being that example, was debunking certain myths about abstaining couples. One myth was the notion of what abstaining couples should look like. For instance, Savannah mentioned, “When they see Roderick, and then they saw us together, nobody's mind

went to, you know, that's what we're choosing to do...they were pretty much shocked.”

Expressed slightly different by Lisa,

Most people know high school sweethearts who got married, right? Usually those high school sweethearts had a baby at 18 in high school, and they stayed together, which is fantastic. You know, they are each other's sweethearts. They're meant to be together. Ours is different. Because we didn't want to do that. We wanted it to be us, and us growing, and friendship and, being with each other, before we introduced another human person into the mix.

A few others expressed “defying the odds” from a societal standpoint. For instance Addison shared,

I was very highly aware of how I'm viewed, or how I'm going to be viewed in society as a woman, black, Christian, whatever. And so, [abstaining from] things [sex, drugs, risky environments] were going to keep me from that.

As mentioned previously, only six individuals reported having an example of couples who abstained from sex until marriage. All couples reported serving in this capacity to the present day, offering advice to abstaining couples or individuals in great length. For a few, being the example is what inspired them to participate. As Ramon mentioned, “It is rare to see couples, especially African American couples who are, who have been abstinent, so I really wanted to be a voice for that.”

Dyadic Interview Analyses

During the individual interviews, all participants expressed positive sentiments about their spouse, often becoming tearful as they shared their lived experience, emotions expressed

among both husbands and wives. However, there were two occurrences, where at the end of an individual interview, a male spouse did not want certain information disclosed during the couple interview. In these instances, it appeared to be an attempt to protect a topic perceived as “sensitive” to their spouse. In both cases, the wife disclosed the topic or matter to me during her interview.

In observation of the couple interviews, the sentiments previously expressed were physically exhibited during all ten of the couple interviews. Whether through eye contact when their partner was speaking, their facial expressions when stories were shared, body language, physical touch, or acts of service for a spouse during the virtual interview. They laughed together, their stories were in sync, and positive communication and body language were displayed.

In terms of content analysis, there was a tendency for participants in the dyadic interviews to indicate explicit agreement with what the previous spouse had said, whether it was a recount of what was shared in an individual interview or a response to an original question presented to the couple. There were three instances in which a spouse respectfully disagreed with previous comment from their partner (for an example of this, see earlier section—**The Unexpected: Infertility**). Overall, pairing the content presented and shared by these couples with the observable interactions during their couple interview, their stories appear to be genuine, in sync, and descriptive of a collective experience, the aim of this dissertation.

Chapter Summary

I presented the major findings of the lived experience of SA by eight thematic categories, described in the natural order in which these experiences were told: developmentally, from youth, adulthood, during romantic partnership and now marriage. Findings were organized to address the research question(s), in addition to relevant unexpected results or themes that emerged. Data from both individual and dyadic interviews revealed research participants' perceptions vis-à-vis their experiences of abstaining from sex until marriage. As is typical of qualitative research, quotations from participants were included to illustrate the voices and lived experiences. By using the participants' own words and phrases on how they described their experience, my aim was to elucidate the phenomenon under study.

Religious beliefs motivated participants; these beliefs were often reinforced during childhood, through church attendance and parental messages about SA. However, challenges abstaining occurred as participants were introduced to behaviors, environments, or personal sexual desires that led most participants to have to sex. A significant commitment to abstain from sex until marriage came after the participants matured in both age and as their relationship with God developed. An unexpected result was spiritual moments and encounters depicted throughout their stories, which informed their decision to partner with their spouse. Likewise, due to their religious values, commitment to God, and a desire to align themselves with what their deity ordained, there was a predetermined decision to place sex within the context of marriage.

Taken together, participants felt that by establishing and adhering to allowable behaviors, implementing boundaries, and dating differently, their relationship while abstaining

cultivated friendship, constant communication, togetherness and trust, the key components that serve as the foundation of their marriages today. Although the majority reported sexual challenges, no participant regretted their decision to abstain from sex until marriage. They honored God with their individual commitments and felt that they were reaping the reward: a sacred marriage built on a strong foundation, with sex being an “ingredient to a really great meal.”

CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences and relationship processes of a sample of African American couples who abstained for at least six months prior to marriage. This chapter includes a discussion of the findings related to the literature on motivations and influences of SA, decision-making, relationship sequencing, and Black marriage. Also included is a discussion of theoretical frameworks that help explain the findings. The chapter concludes with a discussion of limitations and areas for future research, practice, and policy.

Interpretation of the Findings

While sexual and relationship history, motivations, or experiences varied for each individual and couple who participated, eight major categories were prominent in their lived experiences. I will discuss these categories in the following six sections: (1) how SA was defined, (2) motivations for SA, (3) contributing factors for the sustainability of SA, (4) the role of spiritual connections, (5) permissible sexual behaviors and boundaries, and (6) perceived costs and benefits of SA. The eight themes that emerged have a dynamic dimension to them and are essential for understanding the overall lived experiences of African American married couples who abstained from sex until marriage for at least six months, a previously unexplored phenomenon.

SA is Abstaining from Penetration, Regardless of Sexual History

On the question of how SA is defined, I found variations in virginity status among participants, including never having sex, having had sex, and having had sex with their partner

before their commitment to abstain from sex until marriage. These results are consistent with other studies, especially those that referred to abstinence after sexual debut as secondary abstinence (Loewenson et al., 2004; Rasberry & Goodson, 2009; Thomas, 2000) and further confirm that individuals and couples sometimes practice SA after being sexually experienced (Busby et al., 2010; Willoughby et al., 2014). Furthermore, there was also variation in the SA couple groupings (e.g., virgin/virgin, virgin/non-virgin, non-virgin/non-virgin). All participants reflected on how they made a commitment to SA until marriage as individuals prior to meeting or reuniting with their spouses. These findings cannot be corroborated with other work. Only one study of which I am aware (i.e., Busby et al., 2010) included sexually-experienced adults who committed to remain abstinent until marriage.

When participants defined abstinence for themselves, I learned two things. First, throughout the entire sample, the consensus was that SA meant abstaining from all forms of penetration, including penile-vaginal and anal intercourse. Second, SA was practiced by individuals who had never had sex, in addition to those who had experienced sexual debut.

Primary Motivator to Deciding to Abstain: Religion

The initial decision to abstain from sex until marriage was primarily contributed to their religious background and beliefs acquired from frequent church attendance as a youth. This finding corroborates religion being a primary motivating factor for abstinence, as scholars have highlighted in other studies with samples of White, unmarried, inexperienced adults (Dunsmore, 2005; Eisenberg et al., 2009), youth (Landor et al., 2011; Landor & Simons, 2014) and Black young adults (Ashley et al., 2013; Bradley et al., 2013). However, this study's finding that religion's role remained constant as the primary motivator of SA throughout adulthood

was not reflected in the current literature. Other scholars implied that as abstainers increased in age, self-efficacy became the dominant factor (Ashley et al., 2013). Of note, the married couples described their primary motivation to abstain from sex until marriage as being based on their religious beliefs and their relationship with God.

Other motivators to abstain were mentioned: parental and family influence and fear of pregnancy or STDs, often due to the premarital, sexual practices of family and friends. This finding was supported by a study of sexually inexperienced young adults practicing SA, who also compared their experiences against those of their sexually active peers or sexual patterns of family members (Abbott & Dalla, 2008; Kosenko et al., 2016). Of importance, these comparisons were always presented as secondary to their religious beliefs to abstain from sex until marriage.

These contradictory findings may be attributable to the lack of studies that explore the motivating factors of adults who abstained until marriage versus examining the attitudes and messages that might motivate individuals to abstain (Bradley et al., 2013), or factors of those who abstained at a point in time (Abbott & Dalla, 2008; Rasberry and Goodson, 2009). The advantage of this retrospective account of adults who abstained until marriage provided details of what motivated them to abstain, beginning in their youth through their adulthood. Using qualitative inquiry afforded a more nuanced view and grounded assessment of the participants' assessments of how these motivations shifted over time.

Challenges to SA Led to Subsequent Decisions: Have Sex or Keep Going

As participants shared their lived experiences abstaining from sex, themes emerged related to various challenges that they faced between their initial decision as youth (e.g.,

curiosity of sex, feeling ostracized, being teased for their virginity) to abstaining as adults (e.g., an increase sexual temptation and desire, relationship challenges). These findings were consistent with studies on the trends of abstinent teens and young adults as well as those who had sex before marriage (Abbott & Dalla, 2008; Blinn-Pike et al., 2004; Rosenbaum, 2006; Sprecher and Treger, 2015). The fact that twelve individuals later decided to have sex after their initial decision to abstain was also consistent with current literature, noting that decisions regarding SA were not always stable and that beliefs about SA changed over time (Abbott & Dalla, 2008; Blinn-Pike et al., 2004; Rosenbaum, 2006).

This study supported the literature suggesting that an initial decision to abstain from sex until marriage at least delayed sexual debut among adolescents (Rostosky et al., 2003). The average age at first coital sex among participants with sexual history was 17.8 for females and 17.7 for males. These findings are not transferable to all African American youth who abstained. The demographic data collected were solely used to describe the sample and explain notable group differences. However, these results support other work that an initial decision to abstain from sex until marriage delays sexual debut, with both age at sexual debut and years since sexual debut are associated with entry into marriage (Longest & Uecker, 2018; Paik et al., 2016; Santinelli et al., 2017).

Primary Facilitator to Committed and Sustained Abstinence Until Marriage: Internal Religiosity

There was one finding that was emphasized more than participants' initial motivations to abstain. The theme that all participants had a personal relationship with God that developed through time spent in prayer, increased church attendance, reading their Bible, and becoming

in alignment with God was expressed as the central component to their commitment to abstinence. Virgin participants grew older and more mature in their faith, thus the decision to abstain from sex until marriage shifted from what they were supposed to do, to what they wanted to do. For non-virgins, their personal relationship with God led to a commitment to their deity to abstain from sex until marriage, despite their sexually active past. These findings align with other work in which scholars noted that a person's religiosity, the intimate and private connections to a sacred source, was just as important as religious beliefs or practice (e.g., church attendance) to providing motivation for self-development or changed behavior (Ashley et al., 2013; Bergin et al., 1987; Holland, 2009; Landor et al., 2011; Landor & Simons, 2014; Nasim et al., 2006; Marks et al., 2012; Taylor & Chatters, 2010; Walker & Dixon, 2002). It can thus be suggested, as Landor and Simons (2014) implied, that having a high, internal religious commitment could explain how participants were able to not only decide to abstain, but to practice SA until marriage, including those who were sexually experienced. Therefore, there may be a hierarchy in specific motivators to abstinence, some that inspire, and others that move individuals to the commitment and sustainability of SA until marriage.

This study extends the existing literature on SA in important ways. First, it provides reasons why youth or young adults return to abstinence after their initial debut in adolescence or young adulthood. One finding is that among all non-virgin participants, their relationship with God is what influenced their decision to recommit to SA until marriage. Participants expressed their commitment to God to abstain as a decision made out of love, devotion, or a healthy fear of God, in contrast to other factors (e.g., avoiding feelings of guilt, being successful, starting a new committed relationship with a special person, or getting married) as reported in

other studies of secondary abstiners (Bradley et al., 2013, Rasberry and Goodson, 2009). There were no differences in their primary motivations to remain SA, which differed from Rasberry and Goodson's (2009) assumption given their findings of different motivational mechanisms, suggested that "primary abstinence and secondary abstinence may be very distinct experiences" (p. 84)

Secondary Facilitator to Sustained Abstinence Until Marriage: "Keeping Busy"

As participants shared their lived experience often beginning in childhood, their religious beliefs, later personal relationship with God, and commitment to abstain from sex until marriage, challenges to their stance on abstinence did emerge. However, activities that facilitated personal growth required busy schedules and offered needed distractions from opportunities to engage in sex. For instance, participants that abstained in their youth mentioned being actively engaged in sports, church, educational activities, and associating with like-minded friends, who collectively avoided risky behaviors such as drugs, alcohol, and pornography. These findings are supported by scholars who noted that these activities contributed to sustained abstinence in youth and young adults (Abbot & Dalla, 2008; Kosenko et al., 2016). Furthermore, SA in adolescence has been attributed to higher academic achievement, lower probability of risky behaviors (e.g., multiple sex partners, alcohol and drug use), depressive symptoms, and a likelihood of STDs and unplanned pregnancies, when compared to adolescents who engage in premarital sex (Martino et al., 2008; Olmstead et al., 2013; Santelli et al., 1998; Waller et al., 2006). These are factors that ultimately contribute to youth well-being.

As participants moved on to college or their careers as young adults and continued (or recommitted to) their abstinence journey, "keeping busy" was important to remaining abstinent. Specifically, in the avoidance of sexual temptation, overcoming disappointments while dating, or growing weary in their singleness, a few remained abstinent and unpartnered well into adulthood. This coping strategy was helpful in enduring these challenges in adulthood, which, in addition to their faith, was to engage in the normative self-development (e.g., educational attainment, pursuit of careers and gainful employment, avoidance of risky behaviors) that scholars noted as contributors to stability in Black marriages (Cutrona et al., 2011, Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2007, 2016; Wolfinger & Wilcox, 2008).

Among both male and female participants, they described their time of being single and abstinent as working long hours and for some, holding multiple jobs. They obtained advanced degrees, pursued their passions, traveled for both work and leisure, and were heavily involved in college, community and religious activities. These have specific implications for Black men, given that their chances of marrying increase with their earnings (Cready et al., 1997; Wood, 1995). Concomitant with an increase in prosocial behaviors comes a decrease in their risk of being incarcerated or un- or underemployed, making them more attractive or "marriageable" as a spouse (Chambers & Kravitz, 2011; Cready et al., 1997; Fossett & Kiecolt, 1993; Lichter & Crowley, 2004; Pinderhughes, 2002; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2016). As for women, in addition to the benefits of educational attainment, abstaining from sex until marriage decreased their likelihood of premarital births and running a single-parent home before marriage, a factor linked to the decline in marriage rates and quality of African American marriage (Ali & Ajilore,

2011; Biello et al., 2013; Bryant et al., 2016; Bulanda & Brown, 2007; Copen et al., 2016; Kelmer et al., 2013; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2016).

It is plausible that because of their decision to abstain from sex, participants reduced personal constraints (e.g., financial strain, children born to unmarried parents), completed educations, and secured jobs, which are otherwise known to undermine Black marriage. Therefore, there may be similarities between the behaviors and actions employed to practice abstinence and the characteristics that make African American women and men more marketable for marriage and increase marital success (Bumpass and Lu, 2000; Cherlin, 2020; Cutrona et al., 2011). This connection should be further explored in future studies.

Variance in Allowable Sexual Behaviors

Each couple decided on which intimate behaviors they would allow and what boundaries they would implement to practice abstinence once they decided to partner. For most couples, behaviors that were allowed included kissing, hugging, and holding hands, whereas a few also allowed cuddling and heavy petting. For all, penetration (including penile-vaginal or anal intercourse) was not allowed and would be considered breaking their abstinence. This finding is consistent with other studies (Abbott & Dalla, 2008; Bogart et al., 2007; Lefkowitz et al., 2004) but slightly inconsistent with one that found that most individuals considered all types of sexually intimate behaviors (e.g., oral) as "sex" (Regnerus, 2007). Scholars revealed that anal sex could be an allowable behavior among abstaining participants (Miller, 2017; Russell, 2017). The finding that allowable sexual behaviors varied among participants is consistent with the current literature (Bersamin et al., 2005; Julian, 2018; Landor & Simons, 2014; Shepherd et al., 2017). It was not clear whether one type of sexual behavior

had a different influence on relationships than other types (Regnerus, 2007; Ronis & O'Sullivan, 2011), a question that should perhaps be explored in future investigations.

Surprisingly, two virgin/virgin couples engaged in more extensive sexual behavior (e.g., oral sex and partner-witnessed or -assisted masturbation) when compared to other groups. Additionally, one non-virgin/non-virgin couple adhered to more strict behaviors, initially not allowing kissing, introduced it, only to later retract it until marriage. An observed pattern between the allowance of sexual behaviors and virginity status is not clear because I have insufficient data on this. Still, couples who have never had penile-vaginal sex expressed an ability to "say no," exhibiting a level of self-efficacy that might not be shared among non-virgin participants (Cort et al., 2016). Another plausible explanation is that virgin or abstaining couples were not exempt from the natural progression of sexual behaviors between couples, especially during long courtship periods (Sassler et al., 2016; Sprecher & Treger, 2015). For instance, the two virgin couples' length of courtship was 12 and 4 years, respectively, whereas the average courtship duration was 1.5 years for non-virgin couples. Therefore, it is likely that such connections exist between relationship duration and allowable sexual behaviors and should further be explored.

Boundaries in visits, self-imposed curfews, and dating in public were strategies that aided in the adherence and sustainability of abstinence until marriage. Participants also shared cognitive and relational strategies to adhere to the boundaries set to remind each other of their common goal to honor their commitment to God and engage in open and honest communication about their triggers. Additionally, they took action not to incite sexual arousal when not with their partners (i.e., not watching pornography or R rated movies). These findings

align with the work of other scholars who identified similar strategies used to avoid sexual intercourse among abstaining young adults (Abbott & Dalla, 2008; Kosenko et al., 2016). These findings enhance our understanding of the roles boundaries and purposeful dating play in sustaining abstinence until marriage. Furthermore, engaging in leisure activities with a partner increases communication and marital satisfaction when leisure satisfaction is high (Berg et al., 2001). Therefore, shared leisure activities introduced to avoid sexual temptation while dating may have strengthened the communication among these married couples.

The Perceived Benefits of SA: A Satisfying Relationship and a Marriage Built to Last

Once couples decided to commit to a romantic relationship and enforced boundaries to practice abstinence, relationship processes were elicited that served pivotal to not only their courtship, but also to cultivating a satisfying marital relationship. Communication, commitment, trust, togetherness, and even the pace of their relationship were all dominant themes of their lived experiences. As many couples described, it was what they built while dating and abstaining that made their marriage today. Specifically, given that couples were steadfast in their commitment to God to abstain, they were ultimately committed and dedicated to each other in their relationship. Therefore, those same expectations for fidelity, honesty and open communication were expected in their marriage. All participants shared that these expectations were being met, therefore, they were satisfied in whom they chose to marry and were confident that their partner would remain faithful, given the sacrifice each made during their courtship. This finding is supported by Young and Kleist's (2010) work, who suggested that as partners fulfilled what was expected of them (successful abstention, faithfulness to their commitment to God), this behavior reinforced the perception that they were capable of

meeting expectations (fidelity in marriage), therefore, influenced the sense of security and dependability they had with that partner.

The present findings seem to also be consistent with other qualitative research on African American couples, in particular, in which the processes of commitment, communication, and trust were deemed vital to the perceived health (satisfaction and stability) and marriage (Ferguson-Cain, 2015; Jackson, 2020; Marks et al., 2008; Vaterlaus et al., 2017). The current study's findings differ from earlier studies in that communication was not regularly described as taking "work" (Vaterlaus et al., 2017) or a skill that was a continued challenge (Ferguson-Cain; 2015; Jackson, 2020). Instead, communication was described as a process fostered before marriage, with this element's strength in their marriage being attributed to SA, a commitment and resulting unfolding relationship process, in part. Practicing SA is what made the couples' marriages stronger; in earlier work, persevering through marital conflict and acceptance of their partner's strengths and challenges was cited as a key marital strength (Jackson, 2020; Marks et al., 2008). Other factors that were described prior to marriage were friendship, sacrifice, and a commitment to God that they endured together, thus building subsequent trust and commitment in their now marriage, findings that were corroborated by other scholarly work on these relationship processes and their influence on marital outcomes (Impett & Gordon, 2010; Monk et al., 2014; Stanley, Whitton, et al., 2006).

The Perceived Costs of SA: Initial Sexual Dissatisfaction and Lack of Support with Sexual Concerns

All couples expressed concerns regarding their first sexual experiences and satisfaction after marrying. This was not an expected finding. They hoped that God would bless or reward

their sex life for adhering to SA and expected to have quality and frequent sex immediately after marriage. One participant described this sentiment as “making up for lost time.” The finding that couples’ sexual expectations were unrealistic, in a sense, was supported by a recent qualitative study of Black married couples (Ferguson-Cain, 2019), but contradicts other quantitative studies on sexual satisfaction (Hernandez et al. 2011; Pargament & Mahoney, 2005; Stanik & Bryant, 2012). For instance, scholars reported that married individuals who sanctified their marriages (i.e., perceived one’s marriage as having divine character) had greater marital satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, and sexual intimacy than those who did not sanctify their marriages (Hernandez et al. 2011; Pargament & Mahoney, 2005). Other scholars found a strong positive association between sexual satisfaction and marital quality among Black newlyweds (Stanik & Bryant, 2012). In contrast, though couples’ expectations for marital satisfaction were met, their reported sexual satisfactions evolved over years.

There are several possible explanations for these mixed results. Participants’ expectations of how satisfying sex would be once married was described. They believed that it would be “just like in the movies,” implying how the media portrays sex and how it can be romanticized. This finding is confirmed by other scholars who examined the association between provocative sexual media and their associations with aspects of sexual satisfaction among partnered or married couples (Leonhardt & Willoughby, 2019). Another plausible explanation is that the religiosity of the participants could possibly influence their sexual satisfaction. Scholars have identified a dualistic perspective on this effect (Leonhardt, Busby, Hanna-Walker, et al., 2020), suggesting that a person’s religiosity can impart sexual sanctification (i.e., believing sexuality to have divine character and significance, Hernandez et

al. 2011), an attitude known to influence sexual satisfaction positively. A person's religiosity can also inspire guilt about sex (Hackathorn et al., 2016), an adverse effect comprised of self-imposed punishment for violating "proper" sexual conduct known to negatively influence sexual satisfaction (Leonhardt, Busby, & Willoughby, 2020). The current study's findings corroborate this literature in that a few participants described their first sexual experience as a spiritual experience even after a period of abstinence and marrying their spouse. This finding contradicts the "sacred bed" phenomenon, a form of guilt that religious individuals tend to have that influences sex satisfaction among the unmarried, but that tends to go away among married participants, especially among those who have refrained from sex until marriage (Hackathorn et al., 2016). Observed discomfort with sex attributable to religiosity may carry-over into marriage (Armstrong, 2019; Emmers-Sommer et al., 2018; Woo et al., 2012).

Participants in this study, specifically, those who either had premarital sex themselves, or their spouse had premarital sex, expressed issues with comparison to previous partners, or that the premarital sexual history of their spouse influenced their sex life in some way. Earlier works on SA found that premarital sex negatively influences marital satisfaction and divorce, but for women only (Kelly & Conley, 1987; Tavis & Sadd, 1977). Others revealed that couples who had no sexual history upon marriage, were happier, less likely to divorce, and more likely to stay committed to marriage, when compared to couples with sexual history (Kahn & London, 1991; Laumann et al., 2000; Whyte, 1990). Although the couples in this study expressed sexual dissatisfaction and not marital dissatisfaction, an implication of this is the possibility that sexual history may influence marital and sexual quality, even among couples who abstained until marriage, and should be further explored.

Nevertheless, couples did express that sex improved over time, noting that the more comfortable they became with each other and discovered each other sexually, the more satisfied they were in their sexual intimacy. Sex scholars noted a positive learning effect when partners became familiar with each other's sexual preferences, and thus improved the skills needed to pleasure each other sexually (Liu, 2003; Schmiedeberg & Schröder, 2016). A consultation with clergy who facilitated premarital preparation and counseled newlyweds suggested that sexual satisfaction requires:

A commitment to learning about each other's intimate preferences and sexual histories, beginning in childhood. Understanding the developmental underpinnings and origins of an adult's first sexual experiences will be important for meeting their needs and knowing about challenges they may have experienced in the past. Couples must be aware that the sexual arena is another area that they must adjust to after marriage (R. Yates, personal communication, October 8, 2020).

Another explanation is that shared religiosity aided in improved sexual satisfaction over time (Cranney, 2020; Dew et al., 2020). The presence of small children in the household could also contribute to sexual dissatisfaction experienced in marriage (Schmiedeberg & Schröder, 2016). Of note, three participants attributed their sexual challenges to trauma, with one having a rare sexual disease, which scholars have noted as a complicated and multifaceted phenomenon to unveil that requires mental health intervention (Davis & Reissing, 2007). Only one of three participants were receiving treatment. All of these explanations warrant further investigation.

Another unexpected finding was lack of support from others during their abstinence journey. Although abstaining from sex until marriage is a religious mandate, the messages received about SA, primarily "sex is bad" or "wait for sex until marriage," often: a) excluded reasons and benefits of SA until marriage; b) excluded individuals who were committed to abstinence; c) and lacked information needed to prepare them for dating while abstinent, or expectations for sex after marriage. The couples relied on each other for support to practice abstinence. In doing so, they developed the communication skills to overcome marital and sexual challenges that were raised after marrying. Most felt that they did not have a mentor or another couple to share their challenges with, especially as it concerned matters of sex intimacy.

These results relate to the work of Kosenko and colleague's (2016) qualitative study of unmarried young adults who were practicing SA in that couples were dating other abstainers and also engaged in coping and negotiated sexual boundaries, which aided their ability to abstain until marriage. These coping behaviors are known to facilitate commitment and sacrifice (Johnson & Horne, 2016), and even perceived marital quality (Jenkins et al., 2020) findings also supported in the current study. In contrast, participants in the Kosenko et al. (2016) study reported on faith communities that directly supported abstinence decisions and behaviors by providing role models known to facilitate social comparisons and enforce norms against premarital sex. Although these authors did not specify the racial composition of their unmarried participants or their faith-based communities, one possible explanation for this contradiction might be a difference in the discussion about SA until marriage in predominantly African American congregations/faith communities.

Wilcox and Wolfinger (2016) noted that "congregations with large numbers of divorcees, single parents and people living out of wedlock with their partners, were not eager to preach the advantages of lifelong marriage, much like their treatment of nonmarital sex and single parenting" (p. 154). Similar to earlier work, participants mentioned a conflict in the counsel received from their church and religious leaders, with most of them having engaged or were currently having premarital sex themselves (Chaney et al., 2016; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2007).

Other Prominent Findings

Four notable findings were unexpected and are worth emphasizing next.

Tertiary Abstinence

As previously mentioned, there were variations in virginity status among participants, with some never having sex and others who have. The study further revealed two couples that had sex with each other before abstaining from sex until marriage, with both couples having had a relationship with each other that involved sex in previous years, broke up, committed to abstaining from sex, and later reunited. Therefore, this study's findings expand existing knowledge of abstinence after debut. I revealed a third pattern of abstinence. Building upon earlier work, I propose labeling this pattern of relationship and sexual engagement as tertiary abstinence (Loewenson et al., 2004). These results are consistent with those of other studies that identify and investigate abstinence after sexual debut, known as secondary abstinence, and confirms that SA can be practiced by individuals and couples despite having a sexual history (Busby et al., 2010; Loewenson et al., 2004; Rasberry & Goodson, 2009; Thomas, 2000; Willoughby et al., 2014).

This discrepancy could be attributable to controlling for sexual history in previous work or participants not being asked for details about their sexual history (Busby et al., 2010; Willoughby et al., 2014). For instance, one-item asking, "How soon did you and your partner have sexual intercourse?" could result in two different answers if reflecting on a previous relationship with a current spouse or the relationship that preceded marriage. Qualitative methods and in-depth narratives have the advantage of illuminating nuances in meaning and behavior (Creswell, 2013). These findings suggest that studies conducted on SA should include successful abstainers, with careful examination of sexual history.

SA and Cohabitation

Two couples lived together prior to marriage because of circumstance, not relationship progression. More specifically, both couples expressed that the move was meant to be temporary and that living together did not facilitate engagement or marriage in either couple. Premarital sex and cohabitation has undergone transformational change and is now normalized as a slow but steady transition to marriage (Cherlin, 2020; Martin et al., 2014; Musick & Michelmores, 2018). Scholars who have investigated Black marriage, in particular, note cohabitation as an alternative, not a steppingstone to marriage (Barr et al., 2015; Edin, 2000; Edin & Reed, 2005; Manning et al., 2004) with other scholars noting more broad consequences to cohabitation, especially if their decision to live together excluded definitive plans to marry (Stanley et al., 2004; Stanley & Rhoades, 2009). I could not connect the experiences of these two couples to the broader literature, as there is no published work on couples who met all three conditions: romantically involved, abstaining from sex, and cohabiting (Raley et al., 2007; Teachman, 2004). This is a subgroup requiring further investigation.

Spiritual Connections in Partner Selection

Additionally, participants experienced other spiritual connections that helped them feel confident in their partner selection. A dominant theme emerged that specific actions or encounters occurred, leading most participants to believe that their spouse was "sent by God." These findings were supported by previous research that emphasized the importance of spirituality in partner selection and the decision to marry, especially among African Americans (Chaney & Marsh, 2008; Chaney et al., 2016; Hurt, 2014; Marks et al., 2012; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2016; Wolfinger & Wilcox, 2008).

These findings support the premise that what motivated individuals to abstain from sex until marriage, and the factors that later led them to action, sustainability, and partnership, was multidimensional. Among these couples, religion played a dominant role in deciding to abstain from sex until marriage. To practice abstinence required a deeper level of spirituality or commitment to one's deity (Landor et al., 2011; Landor & Simons, 2014). However, these findings implied that this same level of religiosity and spirituality was useful for the identification, and later selection of a potential spouse. This aligned with the key roles that religiosity played in the satisfaction among happy African American marriages, as well as its role in marriages that were in distress (Beach et al., 2008; Chaney & Marsh, 2008; Chaney et al., 2016; Hurt, 2014; Marks et al., 2012; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2016; Wolfinger & Wilcox, 2008).

The Perception that Marriage is "Different" for Black Couples Who Chose SA

Three couples mentioned that their marriage was different than those around them, specifically, a) that their marriage appeared easier since they communicated very well, with fewer arguments or insults, and had "typical" marital problems; b) they did not experience

infidelity or heartache within their relationship or marriage, as seen in others; and c) that they held their sex life sacred and intimate. Communication, commitment, and trust that SA fostered in the marriages of these couples could account for some of these differences in marital quality often observed in others (Ali & Ajilore, 2011; Bulanda & Brown, 2007; Edin & Reed, 2005; Kelmer et al., 2013; Raley et al., 2015; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2016).

Another explanation of this perceived difference was that these participants had fewer personal constraints upon marriage than other contemporary Black couples. This may have contributed to fewer arguments. Financial strain was a dominant stressor often linked to marital outcomes (Chambers & Kravitz, 2011; Cutrona et al., 2003; Mincy & Pouncy, 2003) as well as other related stressors such as living in impoverished circumstances (Abdullah, 2019; Orbuch & Eyster, 1997). Other studies linked financial strain to the presence of children in the home at the time of marriage for African Americans (Bryant et al., 2016; Orbuch et al. 2000; Pew Research Center, 2011), which none of these couples experienced. Others propose that couples who exhibited high-quality marriages may be able to withstand some of the stressors experienced by African Americans (Gardner & Cutrona, 2004; Lewis et al., 2006; McNeil Smith et al., 2020). Therefore, it could be that they were simply less stressed or handled stress more effectively due to their strong communication skills. A difference in socioeconomic factors could explain this difference of less stress and arguments compared to other couples, given that the sample was well-educated (40% graduate level, 25% with bachelors), gainfully employed, and had a household income of \$100K+, factors that exceed the socioeconomic status of samples employed in other qualitative studies (Chaney & Marsh, 2008; Chaney et al., 2016; Marks et al., 2012; Vaterlaus et al., 2017).

Lastly, the perception that their marriage was different because they held their sex life sacred was consistent with other studies that suggested that sexual sanctification in marriage predicted higher sexual and marital satisfaction, as well as spiritual and sexual intimacy (Hernandez et al., 2011; Leonhardt, Busby, Hanna-Walker, et al., 2020). These findings may help us understand how couples who abstain from sex until marriage perceive the benefits of SA. Participants noted the lack of emphasis placed on the benefits of SA by their religious congregations or parents while growing up, and the lack of representation of couples who abstained until marriage during their abstinence season. The education focused too much on cautionary tales of premarital sex rather than the advantages of choosing to abstain.

The Overall Lived Experience of SA Until Marriage

The consensus is that African American couples who abstained from sex until marriage experienced relationship processes that built a satisfying relationship and endured in their marriages. These couples were happy, satisfied with their partner, and deemed their marriage as a sacred union. They communicated, trusted, and felt that God led their unions together. Subsequently, because of this foundation built on God and the processes that unfolded prior to marriage, the challenges presented once married seemed minute for most participants. The tools and mechanisms to endure those challenges were strengthened prior to their marital union. Although sexual challenges did arise and were unexpected, couples noted that sex was not the cornerstone of their marriage. Instead, communication, commitment, and trust were the cornerstones, a process facilitated by their commitment to God to abstain from sex until marriage. These findings corroborate with past studies on SA, relationship processes, and Black marriage, and have implications for these areas of research. I will now turn to how the findings

of this study were informed by the theoretical and conceptual frameworks used to guide this study.

Implications for Theory and the Conceptualization of SA

Sexual Restraint Theory

Participants' descriptions of the perception that SA fostered commitment, communication, and trust, which were now the foundations on which their marriage was built, was consistent with the predictions of Busby and colleagues' (2010) sexual restraint theory. This philosophy suggested that couples who consciously chose to delay or abstain from sexual intimacy during early couple formation allowed for relationship processes such as communication, commitment, and other social processes to become the foundation of their attraction to each other. Couples used some of the exact terms (commitment, communication, trust, and God) to describe the foundation of their marriage and found their time of abstention was significant to the development and the present functioning of their marriage. These findings are further aligned with the sexual restraint theory as well as research on processes that are critical as couples move forward into companionship and partnership (Busby et al., 2010; Metts, 2004; Stanley, Rhoades, et al., 2006; Stanley & Rhoades, 2009; Willoughby et al., 2014). Additionally, the couples also emphasized that these processes were built prior to marriage and were attributed to their decision to abstain from sex until marriage. The distinct difference in the timing of these processes might best be described by the conceptual framework that helped guide the development of sexual restraint theory, sliding versus deciding.

Sliding versus Deciding

An individual's decision to place sex within the context of marriage was linked with the subsequent informed decisions that followed (partner selection, boundaries, dating practices, and living arrangements to avoid premarital sex). The decision to situate sex within marriage was an example of "deciding" instead of "sliding" in relationships. The extensive research on relationship transitions supported that the decision to wait for sex until marriage could subsequently situate other life-altering decisions (e.g., becoming pregnant, having a child, or living together) within the context of marriage (Rhoades et al., 2010; Stanley & Markman, 1992; Stanley & Rhoades, 2009; Stanley, Rhoades, & Whitton, 2010). One of the most notable findings is that none of the female participants had children at the time of marriage. Only one male participant had a child before marriage, and other children born within previous unions. These couples' decisions to abstain from sex until marriage effectively situated other relationship decisions that could have been detrimental to their relationship, thus preventing other negative consequences for marital unions (Clements et al., 2004; Owen et al., 2013; Stanley, Rhoades & Markman, 2006).

However, these findings should be taken with caution given that I did not directly ask non-virgins whether unplanned pregnancies occurred prior to marriage. One female participant disclosed having a miscarriage before choosing to abstain with a man she was not committed to. Therefore, sliding versus deciding, or premarital pregnancies, among adult abstainers cannot be ruled out, as scholars have confirmed that many young adults engage in sexual behavior or live with someone prior to marriage (Hymowitz et al., 2013; Martinez & Abma, 2020). Further investigation of the effects of SA on secondary, and now tertiary abstainers is warranted. A

possible research question could be, how does having a previous sexual history and potentially "sliding" in previous relationships influence subsequent relationships in which informed-decision making is employed?

Informed Decision-Making. Another area of research that is often guided by the conceptual framework sliding versus deciding is informed decision-making. The findings that couples that decided to abstain from sex until marriage had implications in other areas of their lives were supported in recent literature (Kosenko et al., 2016; Ott et al., 2006). In addition to not having sex, most couples also decided not to live together before marriage, in an effort to practice abstinence, ultimately abstaining from two premarital behaviors deemed normative in contemporary romantic relationships—premarital sex and cohabitation (Cherlin, 2020; Stanley & Rhoades, 2009). Other decisions couples made were not to combine finances or engage in risky behaviors, together or apart (e.g., partying, drinking alcohol, watching explicit content), which supported areas of abstention that scholars concluded as having long-term benefits to relationship and marital outcomes (Rhoades et al., 2010; Stanley & Markman, 1992; Stanley & Rhoades, 2009; Stanley, Rhoades, & Whitton, 2010; Willoughby et al., 2016).

Given that much of the work on sliding versus deciding and decision-making has been on the effects of cohabitation, it is worth revisiting that within this study; there were instances of premarital cohabitation in which two couples reported living together. According to the couples, it "kind of just happened," which is analogous to "sliding" into a cohabiting agreement. There were no other apparent differences in these couples' lived experiences pertaining to relationship processes, perceived satisfaction and influence on marital outcomes, other than

their relationship transitions (e.g., lived together, got married, had sex, had a child). Further work is required to explore this more deeply.

Relationship Sequencing. An additional area of research informed by sliding versus deciding is relationship sequencing. Couples often "started as friends," which was described as a period of intensely getting to know each other, spending time, and sharing each other's values and beliefs. This slow pace allowed partners to fully get to know each other before committing to a romantic relationship. There were similarities between these couples' early experiences given the decision to situate sex within the context of marriage. This was done, however, prior to partnering. Scholars noted that this decision was usually later in the coupling process (Stanley & Rhoades, 2009). Additionally, their relationship with God aided in recognizing a potential suitor for marriage, which represented a factor not in this relationship sequence. Nonetheless, these findings provide support that African American couples followed a modified form of the lower risk relationship sequence, which scholars have not previously examined (Daniels et al., 2017; Sassler et al., 2012; Olmstead et al., 2013; Teachman, 2004). Through a sliding versus deciding lens, African American marriage, marked with a pattern of sliding into relationship transitions (e.g., have sex, have children, maybe live together) and following a higher risk relationship sequence, has adverse effects on relationships and marriage (Rhoades et al., 2010, 2012b). These findings help us understand undergirding processes among adults who follow a lower risk relationship sequence pattern for African Americans. Therefore, I propose that relationship sequencing be further explored, with special attention to the timing of sex and the ways in which this transition influences relationship processes and outcomes.

Dedication versus Constraint Commitment. Instead of constraint commitment, the couples expressed personal commitment, or dedication, supported by scholars who have described this as a level of commitment that often starts with a decision to willingly invest in building the relationship, a type of beginning vital to the means of sustaining long-term marital happiness (Knopp et al., 2014; Owen et al., 2011; Rhoades et al., 2010; Stanley & Markman, 1992; Stanley, Rhoades, & Whitton, 2010). Couples shared not only a desire for a future together, but a sense of togetherness and practicing abstinence as being a high priority to their relationship with God and each other, and a willingness to sacrifice for God. This sense of commitment is similar to how scholars described dedication found in couples who experienced a satisfying and stable marriage (Beach et al., 2011, 2014; Knopp et al., 2014; Millett et al., 2018; Monk et al., 2014, Owen et al., 2011; Rhoades et al., 2010; Stanley, Rhoades, & Whitton, 2010).

Scholars who study Black marriage specifically have concluded that communication, commitment, and a marriage built on a Godly foundation are essential components to marital satisfaction (Bumpass and Lu, 2000, Marks et al., 2008; Millett et al., 2018; Wilcox et al., 2015; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2016). Marital stability was not an outcome explored. Participants described commitment, communication, and trust—key relationship dimensions used to predict stability in African American marriages. The linkage between SA and marital stability among African Americans warrants further investigation.

Implications for SA Research

This research extends the current body of work on SA, given that it is the first qualitative study of African American married couples who abstained from sex until marriage for at least

six months. These findings enhance our understanding of the motivations, challenges, allowable sexual behaviors, and boundaries that help couples practice abstinence. The key strengths of this study are the detailed couples' accounts, which illuminated tertiary abstinence as well as the perceived costs and benefits of SA. These findings can help inform future research, practice, and policy. These insights can guide SA among adolescents and young adults. Nuanced insights about the benefits that SA provides to individuals, couples, marriages and families, and beyond were highlighted in the participants' interviews (Busby et al., 2010; Kahn & London, 1991; Laumann et al., 2000; Oldham, 2019; Stanley & Rhoades, 2009; Stanley, Rhoades, et al., 2006; Teachman, 2004; Willoughby et al., 2014).

Another relevant finding requiring additional investigation is that the decision to abstain among all participants was an individual decision, not a coupled decision. These data must be interpreted with caution since scholars have found that unmarried individuals interested in SA were concerned about their current partner's interest (Bradley et al., 2013). Unmarried couples in which only one partner was committed to practicing abstinence at their time of partnership, required a later joint decision or compliance from the other partner (Coffelt, 2018). Scholars who investigate SA should explore these dynamics within the context of the dyad to more deeply understand the nuances of this decision-making process.

Lastly, scholars should further investigate the premarital sexual history and allowable sexual behaviors of abstainers. Specifically, to what degree does sexual history influence abstaining couples, and if there are significant differences in gender, virginity status of spouse, or abstinent grouping. Also, scholars should investigate if allowable behaviors were merely a couple's choice or preference, or whether certain "pre-sex" behaviors influence relationship

and marital outcomes, similar to the linkages reported in previous work on premarital sex, cohabitation, and marital outcomes. I found it interesting that two of three virgin couples allowed extensive intimate behaviors; this is worthy of deeper investigation. Among virgin couples, there was value in not having any other sexual partners to compare to their mates. Among couples in which one mate was a virgin, there also seemed to be a psychological benefit. The sexually-experienced mate valued their spouse not having any prior sexual experience. Scholars should further explore these findings.

Implications for Black Marriage Research

Given that this study represents the first qualitative exploration of African American married couples who abstained from sex until marriage, it has pertinent implications for the scholarship on intimate relationship processes and outcomes for this population. Previous studies on SA and marital outcomes have used national data sets that primarily consisted of White participants. When racial differences were reported, African Americans were least likely to abstain from sex until marriage, including among religious samples (Ayers, 2019; Cross-Barnet & McDonald, 2015; Rostosky et al., 2004). Scholars have provided evidence that religion plays a vital role in partner selection for African Americans, which supports the findings of this study (Jackson, 2020; Marks et al., 2008; Vaterlaus et al., 2017). Furthermore, religion is a protective factor in the marital outcomes of Black marriage (Beach et al., 2011; Chaney et al., 2016; Fincham et al., 2011; Hurt, 2014; Marks et al., 2008).

The findings underscore the significance of obtaining a more in-depth investigation into the religious practices of African American adults. Scholars agree that special attention to those who desire, expect, and plan to marry in the future is warranted (Dollahite et al., 2004; Marks

et al., 2008). Church attendance, prayer, and a personal relationship with God have implications for the intimate relationships of some African Americans (Allen & Brooks, 2012; Beach et al., 2011; Fincham et al., 2011; Sigalow et al., 2012; Skipper et al., 2018). Indeed, participants' religiosity was the primary motivator to (re)commit and practice SA until marriage. A potential research question for future scholars to further explore could be: Does SA have moderating effects in the development of relationship processes and the marital satisfaction and stability of African American marriage?

Another potential line of inquiry, informed by the findings of this study is: How does a decision to abstain from sex until marriage influence partner selection among Black singles? Given the evidence that finding a partner suitable for marriage, especially for Black women, has been a contributor to low marriage rates (Banks, 2012; Brooks & Moore, 2020; Crowder & Tolnay, 2000; Hurt, 2012; Stackman et al., 2016), SA is of concern with the possibility of adding an extra value or belief, or in this case, practice, that could slow relationship progression or reduce availability of marital prospects and partners. Three participants expressed these concerns, outweighing the expectation to partner with someone equally yoked or on the same page of abstinence was expressed more, a finding supported by recent studies (Chaney et al., 2016; Chaney & Marsh, 2008; Mattis, 2002). Given the perceived benefits of SA that these couples expressed, it is possible that the added mandate of a partner who is also abstaining increases the likelihood of marital homogamy, which increases the likelihood and later quality of marriage (Blackwell & Lichter, 2004; Monk et al., 2014; Olson et al., 2015). Therefore, it is possible that SA influences partner selection. Again, these relationship considerations require investigation.

A secondary motivator to sexual abstention among the couples was a desire for "something different." There was a less dominant theme that emerged, yet was expressed more often than concerns of partner selection. What types of behavioral decisions did African Americans make who desired to break intergenerational cycles of teen pregnancies, children born to unwed parents, and single parenthood? For the few couples in this study, they chose abstinence to aid in this effort. For them, their goal was achieved by avoiding a premarital birth and not contracting an STD before marriage. One couple mentioned purposely not buying condoms or contraceptives in order to not "position themselves to fail" in remaining abstinent. This finding corroborates other scholars who have studied adolescents and found that abstinence pledgers were less likely to use contraceptives at first sex (Bearman & Buckner, 2001; Regnerus, 2007), and supports the theme that their commitment to God to abstain from sex superseded their desire to refrain from getting pregnant or catching an STD. What else did this decision do for their family or future generations? What other cascading effects are relevant?

As Rhoades and Stanley (2014) stated:

Prior experiences of the sort we have emphasized...[past sexual or cohabiting partners] also reflect behaviors that people have some control over, and their choices can either constrain or protect their romantic and life options in the future. Avoiding one particularly high-risk relationship or avoiding having a child before marriage may alter the course of a person's life significantly, whatever his or her family and economic background (p. 15).

Rosenstock and colleague's (1994) health belief model provides a theoretical framework based on the added health benefits that abstaining from sex until marriage provides to African

Americans (e.g., lower risk of STDs, fewer unplanned pregnancies, less prone to poverty, reduced psychological risks, etc.), but also affords a blueprint to the key behavioral factors needed to refrain from sex until marriage. This conceptual model explains how parents and family members served as motivators to abstinence for participants. One positive aspect about this model is that the key influencers to changed behavior (e.g., beliefs of its consequence, perceived cost and benefits, confidence in the ability to succeed) are within a person's own will and self-agency (Mustanski et al., 2007; Rosenstock et al., 1994). Providing empirically-based education and programming could equip individuals with tools and strategies needed to be proactive and practice SA to allow for a different set of relationship processes to unfold.

According to the health belief model, factors noted that would influence one's SA are (a) the perceived threat of premarital sex; (b) the belief of its consequence; (c) the perceived positive benefits; (d) perceived barriers to action; (e) exposure to factors that prompt action; and (f) the confidence in the ability to succeed (Rosenstock et al., 1994). This is the first study on SA reporting findings in at least five of these areas. Perhaps the confidence in the ability to succeed can be further explored in future work. Given that religiosity played a vital role in one's decision to abstain, and partner selection has also proven to be an essential role in the satisfaction of African American intimate relationships, the behavior of abstaining from sex until marriage, imbedded in a religious context, is worth further investigation.

Limitations

Limitations are external conditions or parameters that restrict or constrain the study's scope or may influence the outcome (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Three limitations are notable. The first is using an exclusively African American sample. It was essential to explore the lived

experiences and relationship processes of African American couples, considering they were underrepresented in the SA literature. Furthermore, the participants were predominantly Christian and highly religious individuals, whose experiences may not reflect the practice of married couples with other racial backgrounds, sexual orientations or to less or non-religious orientations. Another limitation of this study was relying on retrospective reports of both behaviors and perceived relationship quality during a time period in which couples were dating and engaged to be married. Although using retrospective reports were used in studies that examined SA and relationship processes (Busby et al., 2010; Willoughby et al., 2014; Kahn & London, 1991; for exceptions see Peplau et al., 1977; Oldham, 2019), employing data collected at one time point precluded the ability of assessing the accuracy of recalled events and feelings. It is thus suggested that future studies that examine SA in couples recruit newlyweds and ideally design longitudinal studies that track processes and marital measures over time.

Furthermore, one limitation relates to the study recruitment procedures. Two of the religious leaders that I contacted knew several couples who abstained from sex until marriage and thus shared the advertisement using traditional snowball technique. As a result, five couples were members of the same church and two couples were alumni of the same divinity school. Therefore, the religious teachings of these institutions could influence the experiences of this study's sample. Given so, these findings may not reflect the experience of married couples who abstained who are affiliated with other religious congregations, denominations, etc.

Social desirability bias, which is the tendency to present oneself and one's social context in a way that is perceived to be socially acceptable, but not completely reflective of one's

experience (Bergen & Labonté', 2020; Krumpal, 2013), was a potential limitation given the criterion-based sampling, along with my history as a relationship coach who champions SA. However, this bias was minimized by taking active measures to detect and limit biases to strengthen the rigor and transparency of the research and employing opportunities for reflexive contemplation (Bergen & Labonté', 2020; Simovska et al., 2019). Fortunately, when asked at the beginning of interviews if and how the participants knew me as the researcher or personally, only three individuals expressed hearing of me through church affiliation, with not much knowledge other than what was provided on the informed consent. I also took measures to reduce this during data collection by the detection of cues of social desirability tendencies (i.e., denial of any problem, challenge or shortcomings, providing partial or vague answers) and employed questioning techniques known to limit social desirability responses, such as providing assurance that their answers were not wrong, and asking them to please speak freely (Bergen & Labonté, 2020).

The study's remaining limitation is that this sample was more socioeconomically privileged than other contemporary African American married couples. Researchers should recruit from a wider variety of congregations and regions and engage in active partnerships with predominantly Black churches to widen the recruitment of this hard-to-reach population and further investigate these demographic characteristics.

Recommendations for Future Research, Practice, and Policy

Other scholars have noted a tendency is to focus on those who engage in premarital sex after making a vow to abstain, instead of those who abstain until marriage (Abbott & Dalla, 2008; Kosenko et al., 2016; Long-Middleton et al., 2013). As a result, we have a limited

understanding of abstinent individuals' experiences, their strategies for success, and the benefits that this pattern of sexual decision-making and behavior provides. In view of the participants interviewed, this was not only a problem in the scholarly literature but a challenge in church communities and relationship education programs that promoted SA.

Future research is needed in the area of SA, and priority should be on continued investigation of couples who abstained from sex until marriage, regardless of their sexual histories. Furthermore, continued efforts are needed to identify facilitators that helped them practice abstinence and the benefits SA prior to marriage has afforded to these couples. In terms of research efforts, various methods and measures could offer unique vantage points of the couples' lived experiences.

An important practical implication of these results is that religious leaders should change the narrative from "sex is bad" to "sexual abstinence is ok and may have benefits," and here's why." As scholars attempt to reveal additional benefits to SA until marriage, religious organizations should use what is available to communicate the benefits of SA, which exists in academic literature, as well as highlighting the voices of members of their congregation who may have practiced abstinence, as opposed to offering warnings from those who did not. As the participants suggested in this study, support was needed during their abstinence period, and it was hard to find examples of couples who abstained, even among members of their church. It is recommended to diligently find these couples, engage them, and use them to share the tangible benefits of abstaining from sex until marriage and offer practical guidance on how to do so successfully. As scholars, our goal is to provide the community with resources, evidence, and information needed to help in this effort, similar to one scholar's initiative to increase

discussion about sexuality in religious contexts and settings (Armstrong, 2019). This type of guidance is needed to support abstaining couples within religious settings and clergy-led relationship programming (Kosenko et al., 2016).

Efforts to enhance marital preparatory programs and service provided by practitioners should include couples who abstain from sex until marriage. Realistic expectations of sex after marriage should be portrayed for all abstainers, regardless of sexual history, with specialized care to the inexperienced or individuals with sexual trauma that took place prior to marriage. Emphasis should be placed on a partner-specific sexual experience and an exploration period found to enhance sexual sanctification in marriage. Immediate resources should be available, should challenges arise (i.e., a year-long mentorship program for newlywed couples, with seasoned married mentors, similar to themselves in terms of sexual history).

Finally, a key implication for policy is a plan to change messages of sexual avoidance or abstinence-only education programs, specifically the marketing and content in curriculum programming. These findings reveal that in some contexts, a strong message in terms of the adverse effects of premarital sex is not sufficient. What was missing for the few participants who participated in a sexual avoidance program were examples of couples who abstained, and being provided the benefits of SA until marriage. Reshaping the marketing, messaging, and the way we develop curricula for adolescents and young adults, by including various success stories and highlighting variations in scenarios (primary, secondary and tertiary abstainers) may bring a relatable and practical aspect to SA programming. These steps could possibly alter the influence of these programs (Cody & Arbour, 2019).

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APPENDIX A. COUPLE VIGNETTES

Couple 1. Freeman and Renae

Freeman, 43, and Renae, 38, have been married just shy of two years and recently welcomed their first child. They both were raised in the church and encouraged by their parents to practice SA. Freeman was vividly warned of STDs and getting girls pregnant, whereas Renae was cautioned of having children before marriage, an experience her married parents both shared. Although SA was challenged when her mother passed away in her early twenties, she kept her vow until her wedding day. Freeman's test came after receiving an influx of attention from women and eventually became sexually active. After encouragement from a family friend, he gave his life "back over to the Lord," which included practicing SA. Meanwhile, growing weary in her singleness, after relationships not working or showing up to events and holidays alone, Renae finally shared with God that if marriage was not in his will, her answer is YES, still. With their families attending affiliated churches in their neighborhood, their names often came up in conversation as "single and available," yet the two had never met. Renae attended a program at his church one day, which Freeman was not present for. Freeman missed church that day but decided to watch the video replay. He noticed her immediately, saying he "liked what he saw." That was all the convincing he needed to later go to her church, find her, and marry her one year later.

Couple 2. Nathaniel and Aaliyah

Nathaniel and Aaliyah, both 31, have been married for four years and have one infant child. The two met in their teens, the summer right after high school, where their friendship soon blossomed. Nathaniel was raised in a religious two-parent home yet had an experienced high school girlfriend, eventually leading to sexual activity. Aaliyah had a religious mother, who had her as a teen, so abstinence was encouraged and decided early on. On Nathaniel's birthday, he asked Aaliyah to make their relationship "official" and shared that, he too, had been abstaining for a year and wanted to continue. While Aaliyah was away at college, Nathaniel began and excelled in his career in public service.

During their eight-year courtship, the early years were filled with plenty of hours to talk and share stories between classes and shifts. The latter years were personal growth and maturity in their relationship, and keeping an active lifestyle full of fun and physical dates. Nathaniel proposed once they crossed the finish line of a triathlon. The two eloped shortly after, with a wedding the following year.

Couple 3. Roderick and Savannah

Roderick, 34, and Savannah, 29, have been married for five years and have four children, all under five. Roderick comes from a religious home with conservative parents that came with the message "sex before marriage was a sin, so don't do it." Being a high school and college athlete, he was often too busy to entertain girls, although he was tempted. Once cut from his college

team, his faith shifted. Although he began having sex in his twenties, he often felt a firm conviction to return to SA, this time, for God. So he did, along with changing colleges, two decisions that led him to Savannah.

Savannah was born and raised in the Caribbean in a faith-filled two-parent home. Her parents taught that sex was beautiful and natural and should be reserved for marriage, making her decision to abstain easy. Savannah came to the U.S. for college when she met Roderick in the school library. They both knew that things would be serious if they dated, so instead, they became friends. Savannah later began a relationship with someone else, which became toxic and led to a non-consensual experience. Devastated, Savannah left school and returned home. Roderick was the person her family called to "make her laugh" during a very dark time. He was also the friend she leaned on when she returned to campus and devoted her life back to God. Their friendship grew even more profound, and, over time, took a liking to her. After discovering that he wasn't the only one, Roderick knew it was time to shoot his shot, unable to picture his life without her if she ended up with someone else. It didn't take much for Savannah to agree, given that he was her best friend. The next two years consisted of graduation, engagement, and the beginning of a marriage. To them, it didn't seem rushed at all, considering they "always knew."

Couple 4. Avery and Lisa

Avery and Lisa, both 33, have been married for five years and share an infant son. They've been together "all of their lives," first meeting at age 12 and beginning their courtship at the age of 15. They both came from religious homes and attended the same church. The two felt that they had a lot in common, including living with both parents but who had children before marriage and an older sibling who had a child in their teens. Avery says, "he followed the rules," and although he met a girl who hated rules, she was committed to waiting for marriage, which meant for Avery, she was heaven-sent. Lisa was very determined, something that Avery admired most. They were both active in church, with Lisa spending even more time perfecting her artistic craft.

As the two grew older, they dated other people and often lived states away. Yet, they always knew they had each other. He often arranged his life around hers, knowing that "if she says it, it will happen." He only applied for colleges on the east coast, given that's where Lisa wanted to begin her career, which eventually came to pass. It was there that they lived and loved, and on the opening night of Lisa's first show, Avery asked for her hand in marriage.

Couple 5. Anthony and Mia

Anthony, 34, and Mia, 40, have been married for four years and have two small children. Born and raised in the mid-west, Anthony knew from frequent church attendance that a person should wait for sex until marriage but felt social pressure to lose his virginity before college. Once on campus, the fraternity life and reputation that accompanied led to frequent sexual

activity. Music is what led him back to church, soon realizing that God may have had other plans. He abruptly became convicted about having sex, which led to his commitment to SA, and later his then-girlfriend breaking up with him. His new pastime became praying and journaling, where he heard God tell him to move to a city on the west coast, and later, to "not date for two years." He listened, moved, and found a new church to stay out of trouble. It was at the mid-point of his two-year dating hiatus when Mia came along.

Mia grew up on the west coast and went to a church where SA was not emphasized. During her teens, a period of loneliness led her to have sex, later relationships, and a precarious lifestyle she soon abandoned. Mia grew a desire to get closer to God and commit to SA. Although she tried while dating, she would often fall short of her commitment. One day during her devotion, she heard God say, "you need accountability." Within days, an old friend invited her to church that later became her church home. While attending an event with members of her new accountability group, Anthony walked up and introduced himself, the beginning of their yearlong friendship. The day Anthony officially asked Mia to be his girlfriend was two years and one day after his commitment to no dating. The two were engaged within three months and married the following year, each grateful for taking "Holy Spirit" led steps, a path that brought them together.

Couple 6. Warren and Destiny

Warren, 36, and Destiny, 35, have been married for four years, yet their story began several years ago. Destiny, who had two parents that were pastors, had always been encouraged and desired to practice SA. Yet after a couple of upsetting experiences while dating, sex included, she prayed to God "that the next person that I date, let it be the person that I marry," just so that she would not endure that level of pain again. Shortly after, she met Warren among mutual friends. One time, after falling ill with the flu, she watched Warren walk into her apartment with Kleenex, medicine, and soup to care for her, and at that moment, she knew she had grown to love her friend. After several of Destiny's not-so-subtle hints, Warren asked her to date, which over time, also led to sex. Their differences in church denominations guided their breakup after graduation.

Several years later, Warren had moved to a new city to advance his career in education. With the time of isolation, he began to talk to God more. Warren prayed about the crazy relationships he'd been experiencing and made a promise to God to "chill" on dating and that He would have to send someone Himself since he was choosing the wrong ones. It had only been about a month when Warren received a random call from Destiny, his old college girlfriend, the one he had always loved. She had recently attended a family friend's funeral and was urged to call him to make sure that there were no ill feelings between them. Now with her phone number, Warren began to check on her and eventually learned that Destiny had gotten more serious with her spiritual life and was practicing SA until marriage. He quickly thought of God's "sense of humor" given their recent conversation. They dated long-distance before marrying two years later, with tons of college friends sharing in the excitement of their reunion.

Couple 7. Moses and Denise

Moses, 82, and Denise, 55, have been married for 12 years. Moses was raised primarily by his mother after his parents divorced when he was young. He was a shy kid, loved school, so SA was a no-brainer. When his older brother went off to the military, he left Moses his favorite instrument. Moses began to play, becoming quite skilled, without formal training. Others quickly took notice, with his brother's parting gift leading him to a prosperous music career. Moses played in the bands of top R&B artists of all time, Aretha Franklin, Diana Ross, and the Jackson 5, to name a few. After several years, and two ended marriages later, he landed at a new church, with a pastor that taught practical ways to abstain, teachings he had never heard before. One evening, after ending a relationship reminiscent of his industry life, he prayed to God, "I won't touch another woman until you send me one that prays." It was three years later when he met Denise.

Denise loved God at a very young age and committed to SA very early in life. Being an academic, Denise spent her time learning about relationships, preparing for marriage, and following her love and passion for music. After obtaining her doctorate, she accepted an offer to orchestrate a specialty choir at a church in a new city. Upon arrival, she auditioned choir members immediately, with Moses being one of them. Their working relationship quickly formed into a friendship, with Moses soon expressing interest. Denise asked God if Moses was her husband, and she heard Him say, "no." From that day on, she began praying to God every night to send Moses a wife, considering he was such a nice guy and friend. Within a year, the two were married, and their running joke is, "God didn't say, 'No,' he said, 'Moe.'"

Couple 8. Jacob and Addison

Jacob, 36, and Addison, 33, have been married for ten years and share a one-year-old child. Jacob grew up in a two-parent home where his parents practiced SA until marriage; therefore, SA was expected. Having experienced low self-esteem while younger, his virginity aided in gaining confidence, as it was something he began to value and considered a gift to his future wife. It could have been his new confidence misconstrued as arrogance, but Jacob found himself in many heated discussions among classmates at his new college. To make peace, he invited a group of students to a party since he lived off-campus. Addison was the only one from that group who showed up, arriving alone. Fascinated by her dedication, he greeted her immediately. The two spent half of the night tucked in a corner, away from the crowd, debating.

Addison attended an in-state college but was far from her inner-city neighborhood. She was raised by her older sister, with their mother incarcerated and father absent. Growing up, she was always fearful of sex. Attending church with her best friend and participating in a church-based abstinence-only program solidified her SA stance. She focused on school and was involved in committees and organizations, activities that she continued in college. Going to a predominantly-white university, she made it a point to know all the Black students on campus,

including Jacob. Not only was his ethnicity ambiguous, with others often questioning his "Blackness," but culturally, he was different. He challenged her thinking and exhibited a level of confidence that she found quite attractive. Their debates soon became frequent, then daily throughout their ten-year courtship. Along with their virginity, another gift this couple considers as God-sent is shared conversation.

Couple 9. Demetrius and Tracy

Demetrius and Tracy, both 45, also met and dated in college. Their relationship started fast, falling in love rather quickly. Soon they were together, throughout college, with sex, drugs, and alcohol included. They experienced many ups and downs that led to an official break up once they graduated. The two parted ways and did not keep in touch. Although the relationship did not end well, Demetrius was the only man she brought home to meet her family, who had always asked how he was doing. "I don't know, and I don't care" was often her answer, and she moved on with her life. As years surpassed, her relationship with God grew, and SA began to be of interest. As she studied, she often had questions about what she read in the Bible, which was often rejected or dismissed, either by church members or potential suitors. She desired to have a mate with who she could freely and unapologetically talk about God. One day while talking with her sister, once again, Demetrius' name came up. Her sister asked for his number to call him, which Tracy did not have, but gave her his mother's instead.

Meanwhile, Demetrius moved back to his hometown and had fallen on hard times. His relationship with God strengthened while he lived in a one-room apartment, without electricity, reading the Bible with a candle. Soon after, his visit to a local church led to his salvation, and he later became a minister. Several years later, he received a message from an old friend, his ex-college girlfriend's sister. He missed the initial call but returned it at first chance, only to hear Tracy's voice on the receiving end. After 45 minutes of catching up, talking about God, and how much their lives had changed spiritually, they decided to give their love another chance. One phone call, 17 years, and two teenagers later, they are still serving God together.

Couple 10. Ramon and Andrea

Ramon, 31, and Andrea, 32, have been married for two years with no children. The two met the first semester in college and quickly learned they attended the same church. Andrea recognized him right away, given that he was active in the youth ministry at their church. However, Ramon did not remember Andrea but drew a liking to her rather quickly, as she reminded him of one of his three sisters back home. Ramon was the oldest, had religious parents; however, his family had a history of teen pregnancy that dated back three generations. His decision to practice SA was from his religious beliefs and breaking the "generational curse." Similarly, Andrea witnessed single parenthood growing up from close family members, a pattern she did not want to repeat. They knew this about each other considering they were instant friends, "thick as thieves" as others would say, remaining respectful given that they each were dating other people.

Their decision to date came after a period in which they were both single and received a series of spiritual events that confirmed they were supposed to be together, romantically. Soon, they did not need further convincing, considering their brother-sister relationship quickly flipped to a romantic attraction as God-rapidly revealed their future to them. For instance, the night Ramon shared the prophetic words he received, Andrea went home and prayed for a sign to later dream that night about their wedding and her future children. Their courtship lasted ten years, allowing each other to grow, learn, and support each other, as well as grow in their relationship with God. Each finds this time essential, considering Ramon is now a ministry leader, something he always knew he was called to do. Waiting until marriage is something the two pride themselves in doing, stating that the "curse stopped" with them.

Return to CHAPTER 4.

APPENDIX B. IRB APPROVAL LETTER

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY
OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Institutional Review Board
Office for Responsible Research
Vice President for Research
2420 Lincoln Way, Suite 202
Ames, Iowa 50014
515 294-4566

Date: 07/01/2020

To: Emily McKnight Tera R Jordan, PhD

From: Office for Responsible Research

Title: **Deciding to wait: Exploring motivating factors and relationship processes and outcomes linked to remaining sexually abstinent until marriage among African Americans**

IRB ID: 20-268

Submission Type: Initial Submission **Exemption Date:** 07/01/2020

The project referenced above has been declared exempt from most requirements of the human subject protections regulations as described in 45 CFR 46.104 or 21 CFR 56.104 because it meets the following federal requirements for exemption:

2018 - 2 (iii): Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) when the information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a LIMITED IRB REVIEW to [determine there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain confidentiality of the data].

The determination of exemption means that:

- **You do not need to submit an application for continuing review. Instead, you will receive a request for a brief status update every three years. The status update is intended to verify that the study is still ongoing.**
- **You must carry out the research as described in the IRB application.** Review by IRB staff is required prior to implementing modifications that may change the exempt status of the research. In general, review is required for any *modifications to the research procedures* (e.g., method of data collection, nature or scope of information to be collected, nature or duration of behavioral interventions, use of deception, etc.), any change in *privacy or confidentiality protections*, modifications that result in the *inclusion of participants from vulnerable populations*, removing plans for informing participants about the study, any *change that may increase the risk or discomfort to participants, and/or* any change such that the revised procedures do not fall into one or more of the [regulatory exemption categories](#). The purpose of review is to determine if the project still meets the federal criteria for exemption.
- All **changes to key personnel** must receive prior approval.

APPENDIX C. PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT AND DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

1. The researcher recruited potential participants by sending **Recruitment Email - Religious Leaders**
2. Potential participants reviewed the email, reviewed the link to **Recruitment Ad Flyer** and either decided to enroll themselves, or forwarded to others.
3. The potential participant then completed the **Pre-screening and Enrollment Survey** – powered by Qualtrics (completed by either spouse)
4. Enrolled participants then received the **Participant Email - Welcome** - generated by Qualtrics.
 - The email included:
 - i. A PDF copy of the **Full Informed Consent** document
 - ii. Link to **Electronic Informed Consent and Demographic Questionnaire** powered by Qualtrics
 - iii. A request to return to go to Calendly to schedule their interviews.
5. Enrolled participant completes Electronic Informed Consent and Demographic Questionnaire (completed by both spouses, separately).
6. Enrolled participant(s) responds with availability for the interviews or self-schedules interview using Calendly (completed by either spouse).
7. The researcher responded with the confirmed date and time of the interview(s) along with the Zoom link.
8. The researcher checked Qualtrics 4 hours before the scheduled interview to ensure that the informed consent and demographic questionnaire is complete for both spouses.
9. The researcher sent **Participant Email: Interview Reminder**, and if required, would prompt that the necessary informed consent and demographic questionnaire required completion.
10. The researcher conducted online interviews via Zoom and collected data from participants using the **Interview Guide**. There was one individual interview and one joint interview per couple, for a total of three interviews conducted.
11. Once the interview was complete, the researcher sent a request to the department for an Amazon e-gift card for \$50 as participant compensation. Gift card was sent to each spouse separately using their email address.
 - The researcher will provide a list of email addresses the e-gift cards were sent to in lieu of the, a temporary process to support social distancing.
12. The researcher manually sends **Participant Email: Thank you + Compensation Confirmation** to each spouse.
 - The researcher asked for an email reply confirming receipt of the gift card(s) and to complete the Receipt of Compensation Form (for under \$100)
13. If required, the researcher sends **Participant Email: Member Check** if questions were raised about the information the participant(s) shared and will ask for clarification about their opinions or reflections (sent to each participant separately).

APPENDIX D. RECRUITMENT MATERIALS

Recruitment Email: Religious Leaders

Subject: Participants needed for a research study on married Black couples who abstained from sex until marriage.

[Organization name and address]
Good afternoon [Affiliate's name],

My name is Emily McKnight, a 4th year doctoral student at Iowa State University.

Just recently, I was approved for a study that explores the lived experiences of 10 Black married couples who abstained from sex until marriage.

To qualify for the study, participants must meet the following criteria:

1. currently married and living with their spouse
2. both spouses identify as African American
3. couple abstained from sex until marriage for at least six months prior to marriage

Three online interviews will take place, one individual and one couple interview. Participants will receive a \$50 Amazon gift card each should they participate. The interviews will be administered via Zoom, and both audio and visual components will be recorded for future analyses. All data will be kept confidential and stored safely on Iowa State University's server.

You can assist in the recruitment of this study in the following ways:

1. personally refer couples you may think that would meet the study's criteria by forwarding this email
2. distribute this email to your congregation or specific groups within (e.g. Marriage Preparatory graduates, Marriage Ministry list serve)
3. participate yourself, if you and your spouse meet the criteria

You and others can learn more about the research study by reviewing the attached advertisement.

For those who meet the criteria and they are welcome to confirm their eligibility and enroll themselves and their spouse by clicking here. → [Pre-screening and Enrollment Form](#)

Thank you in advance for your assistance and should you have any questions or concerns, I can be reached by phone or text at (XXX) XXX-XXXX or by email at mcknigen@iastate.edu.

Emily McKnight

Recruitment Advertisement



Ten married couples are invited to take part in this research study on married Black couples who abstained from sex before marriage. The information will be used to gain a better understanding of an understudied phenomenon.

To qualify, participants must meet the following criteria:

1. currently married and living with their spouse
2. both spouses identify as African American
3. abstained from sex until marriage for at least six months prior to marriage

There will be a total of three interviews per couple conducted on-line via Zoom, one individual interview, and one couple interview. It is expected that each interview will not exceed one hour in duration. Each participant will be paid in the form of an Amazon e-gift card up to \$50 for their participation.

For more information, call or text Emily McKnight at (XXX) XXX-XXXX or email mcknigen@iastate.edu.

If you meet the criteria above and would like to enroll now, you are welcome to complete the pre-screening form by clicking [here](#).

Pre-Screening and Enrollment Survey

Powered by Qualtrics: Link to [Pre-screening and Enrollment Survey](#)

Thanks for expressing your interest in participating in the **Sexual Abstinence, Relationships, and Marriage Research Study**.

This pre-screening form confirms your eligibility for the study and should take about 3 - 5 minutes to complete.

The expectation is that both you and your spouse will participate in the study. For convenience, this screening and enrollment form collects information about you and your spouse.

If you and your spouse are eligible, both of you will receive an email confirming your enrollment, and instructions for your next steps within 24 hours. Please check your spam folder should you not receive it as expected.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact the researcher, Emily McKnight, directly at mcknigen@iastate.edu or by phone or text at (310) 946-7497.

Otherwise, please proceed to answer the following questions to screen for your eligibility for enrollment.

Thank you for your time.

1. What is your name (First and Last)
2. What is your gender?
3. Which race do you most identify with?
 - White
 - Black or African American
 - American Indian or Alaska Native
 - Asian
 - Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
4. Are you currently married, and live with your spouse?*
5. Did you abstain from sex for at least six months prior to marriage?*
6. What is your email address?
7. What is your best daytime telephone number?
- Now enter your spouse's information
8. Spouse's name (First and Last)
9. To be sure, does your spouse also identify as African American?
10. What is your spouse's email address?
11. Please leave any additional information that you would like us to know in the space provided below.

12. Your enrollment is now complete. Please look out for an email within 24 hours, confirming your enrollment.

*These questions serve as a confirmation of eligibility. If they answer incorrectly, they will receive the below message.

Your response to your previous question determined that you are NOT eligible for this research study. Below is the eligibility:

1. You must be married and currently living with your spouse
2. You and your spouse must both identify as African American
3. You and your spouse must have abstained from sex until marriage for at least six months.

If you think this message is in error, and that you DO qualify for the study, please press the BACK button and correct your answer accordingly.

Participant Email: Welcome

Subject: You are officially enrolled! Welcome!

Greetings [participant's name]

Welcome to the Sexual Abstinence, Relationships, and Marriage Research Study!

The collection of this data is conducted entirely online to ensure that we all remain safe during these challenging times. Below outlines your immediate next steps:

Step one: Read over the attached PDF document in its entirety. This document details your involvement and rights as a participant in this research study. [SA Study - Full Informed Consent 5.30.20.pdf](#)

Step two: Follow this link to electronically acknowledge receipt of this document, consent to participate in the study, and to complete a brief demographic questionnaire (takes about 10-15 minutes). ==> [Start Demographic Questionnaire](#)

Step three: Return to this email and reply [with your availability for the next two weeks](#) so that we can schedule your online interviews. You can also self-schedule your interview(s) using Calendly by clicking [here](#).

Remember, there will be three interviews total, one individual each, and one couple interview. You can choose to schedule these separately (45 min – 1 hr. each) or all together (2-3 hours).

Please do not hesitate to reply to this email, call or text me at (XXX) XXX-XXXX if you have any questions.

Looking forward to learning from you soon,

Emily McKnight

APPENDIX E. INFORMED CONSENT

This research is being conducted by Emily McKnight, a doctoral candidate in Human Development and Family Studies at Iowa State University. This research is under the supervision of Dr. Tera R. Jordan, Assistant Provost of Faculty Development, and Associate Professor of Human Development and Family Studies at Iowa State University. You are being invited to participate in this study because you are currently married, identify as African American, and experienced sexual abstinence prior to marriage.

This form has information to help you decide whether or not you wish to take part in a research study. Your participation is completely voluntary. Please discuss any questions you have about the study or this form with the interviewers or the principal investigator, Emily McKnight (contact information below), before deciding to participate.

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences and relationship processes of a sample of African American couples' who abstained from sex until marriage.

Description of Procedures

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to complete a virtual interview using Skype or Zoom. The virtual interview will require (a) connection to high-speed internet (b) a quiet environment, (c) a cellular phone or computer with a webcam, and (d) moderate computer skills.

Three interviews will take place with a trained interviewer:

- 1) Individual Interview
- 2) Couple Interview (with both you and your spouse)

Preferably, these interviews will take place on the same day. Each interview will last 30-45 minutes, not to exceed 1 hour. Collectively, both interviews will be completed within 2-3 hours.

During the interview, you will be asked questions about your decision to abstain from sex until marriage, how sexual abstinence was defined, and how this decision impacted you as an individual, your relationship and marriage to your current spouse. All virtual interviews will be video and audio recorded to help the researcher look at the data for themes and further report findings.

Risks or Discomforts

While participating in this study, you may experience psychological distress as you answer questions about yourself or your spouse, previous relationship or sexual history, and reflect on your experience while abstaining from sex until marriage.

Given the project's purpose, I encourage complete transparency when offering your opinion or an account of your experience with sexual abstinence before marriage. You may provide and

reflect upon any difficulties you may have experienced. Participants will be able to skip any questions they choose, take breaks as needed, or leave the study at any point (or leave the meeting if participating in a virtual interview).

Confidentiality

It is possible that you may discuss very personal and private information. Because your confidentiality is something we are committed to protecting, we will employ the following measures to minimize risks:

- a) Due to the rarity of this phenomenon, pseudonyms will be used for you and your spouse when discussing and disseminating the results of this study.
- b) Considering that the second interview will include your spouse, the researcher will ask during your individual interview if there is anything you would like to keep confidential. We vow to uphold that request, should it apply.

As the interviewer, I will take steps to minimize legal risks (for you and someone else) including making sure that information you provide is stored securely, removing identifiable details from your information as soon as possible, and ensuring that information you share cannot be connected back to you or your spouse when study results are reported.

Electronic data will be stored on a password-protected, university-controlled computer server. Two-factor credentials are required for access to electronic data. Data will be accessible to approved research staff. Research records identifying you as a participant will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by applicable laws and regulations and will not be made publicly available. However, federal government regulatory agencies, auditing departments of Iowa State University, and the Institutional Review Board (IRB) (a committee that reviews and approves human subject research studies) may inspect and/or copy study records for quality assurance and data analyses. These records may contain private information.

Benefits

If you decide to participate in this study, there may be a direct benefit to you, such as learning more about your experiences. It is hoped that the information gained in this study will add value to researchers, policymakers, professionals, therapists, and religious organizations by highlighting sexual abstinence before marriage and the perceived impact that this courtship behavior has on relationships and marriage. Your answers will be used to help recommend how policies and services can be improved to better support individuals, couples, and marriages.

Costs and Compensation

You will not have any costs from participating in this study. You and your spouse are both eligible to receive a \$50.00 Amazon e-gift card for your participation. If all three interviews (one per individual and one couple interview) are complete, you both will receive the \$50 gift card. If you participate and your spouse does not, you will receive the \$50 e-gift card for your participation. If either of you begins the interview, but leave the study before the interview ends, you will receive a \$10 e-gift card for your participation.

The gift cards will be sent electronically once all interviews are complete. You will need to acknowledge receipt of your payment via email once received. Please know that payments may be subject to tax withholding requirements, which vary depending upon whether you are a legal resident of the U.S. or another country.

Participant Rights

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You can choose not to take part in the study or stop participating at any time, for any reason, without penalty or negative consequences. You can skip any questions that you do not wish to answer. The research team will use cases with partial or incomplete information to address the project objectives, where relevant and applicable.

Questions

If you have questions about the purpose or results of the study, you may contact Emily McKnight by email at mcknigen@iastate.edu or by phone or text at (XXX) XXX-XXXX. You are also welcome to contact the supervising faculty member, Dr. Tera R. Jordan, Assistant Provost for Faculty Development and Associate Professor of Human Development and Family Studies at Iowa State University by email at trh@iastate.edu or by phone at (515) 294-9804. If you have any questions about the rights of research subjects or research-related injury, please contact the Office of Responsible Research, 2420 Lincoln Way Suite 202, Ames, IA. Their email address is IRB@iastate.edu, and their phone number is (515) 294-1516.

Consent and Authorization Provisions

Your signature indicates that you meet the criteria to participate, voluntarily agree to participate in this study, that the study has been explained to you, that you have been given the time to read the document, and that your questions have been satisfactorily answered. You will receive a copy of the written informed consent prior to your participation in the study.

[Signature obtained electronically at the start of Demographic Questionnaire]

I certify that the participant has been given adequate time to read and learn about the study, and all of their questions have been answered. It is my opinion that the participant understands the purpose, risks, benefits, and procedures that will be followed in this study and have voluntarily agreed to participate.

Electronic Informed Consent

Powered by: Qualtrics and precedes the Demographic Questionnaire

Welcome to the Sexual Abstinence, Relationships, and Marriage Research Study!

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences and relationship processes of a sample of African American couples' who abstained from sex until marriage.

For this study, you will be presented with demographic information relevant to sexual abstinence, relationships, and marriage. Later, you will be asked several questions about your experience during two online interviews. Your responses will be kept completely confidential.

This portion of the study should take you around 10 - 15 minutes to complete. You will receive a \$50 e-gift card for your participation, after the interview portion is completed. Your participation in this research is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw at any point during the study. The Principal Investigator for this study is Emily McKnight and she can be contacted by email at mcknigen@iastate.edu or by phone.

By clicking the button below, you acknowledge a) Your participation in the study is voluntary b) you are 18 years of age or older c) you are aware that you may choose to terminate your participation at any time for any reason.

- ☐ I consent, begin the study
- ☐ I do not consent, I do not wish to participate

APPENDIX F. DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

Powered by: Qualtrics and follows the Electronic Informed Consent

Please proceed to complete demographic survey by answering the following questions.

Personal Information

What is your date of birth? _____

What is your age? _____

What is your gender? 1 = Male 2 = Female

Racial Identity

Which race do you most identify with?* (choose one)

1 = White

2 = Black or African American

3 = American Indian or Alaskan Native

4 = Asian

5 = Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander

Marital Status and History

Are you currently married?* 0 = No 1 = Yes

How long have you been married (in years)? _____

On which date did you marry _____

How long did you and your current spouse date before getting married(in years or months)? ____

Did you live together before getting married? 0 = No 1 = Yes

Is this your first marriage? 0 = No 1 = Yes

If no, how many times married, including current spouse? _____

Experience with Sexual Abstinence

Did you abstain from sex before marriage?* 0 = No 1= Yes

How long did you abstain from sex before marrying your current spouse?*

0 = less than six months

1 = 6 months or longer

If 1 is selected: enter the time of abstinence in years and months _____

Sexual History (if applicable)

At what age did you have your first coital sexual experience? _____

How many sexual partners did you have prior to marriage? _____

Does this number include your current spouse? 0 = No 1 = Yes

Family

How many biological children do you have? _____

How many children did you have prior to marriage? _____

How many children did your spouse have prior to marriage? _____

Are there any other children that you assume responsibility for such as step-children, adopted children, foster children, or grandchildren? 0 = No 1 = Yes

If so, please explain: _____

How many children live with you and your spouse? _____

If more than 0, How many of these children are under the age of 5? _____

Are you (or your spouse) pregnant now? 0 = No 1 = Yes

Religion

What religious affiliation, if any, do you currently identify with? _____

How important is religious or spiritual beliefs in your day-to-day life? _____

How many times in the past month did you attend church services (either in person or online)? _____

Education

What is your highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received?

- 1 = Less than high school diploma
- 2 = High school diploma or equivalent (e.g. GED)
- 3 = Some college or technical school, but no degree
- 4 = Associate's degree
- 5 = Bachelor's degree
- 6 = Graduate or advanced degree

Employment

Which of the following categories best describes your employment status?

- 1 = Self Employed/Entrepreneur
- 2 = Employed, working 40 hours or more per week
- 3 = Employed, working 1 - 39 hours per week
- 4 = Not employed, looking for work
- 5 = Not employed, not looking for work
- 6 = Retired
- 7 = Disabled, not able to work
- 8 = 8 = Other

Income

Please tell us about your personal income. Do *not* include other sources of income in your household. (*Select one*)

- 1 = \$4,999 or less
- 2 = \$5,000-9,999
- 3 = \$10,000-24,999
- 4 = \$25,000-49,999
- 5 = \$50,000-74,999
- 6 = \$75,000-99,999

- 7 = \$100,000-124,999
- 8 = \$125,000-149,999
- 9 = \$150,000 or more

Please tell us about the household income. Include all sources of income. *(Select one)*

- 1 = \$4,999 or less
- 2 = \$5,000-9,999
- 3 = \$10,000-24,999
- 4 = \$25,000-49,999
- 5 = \$50,000-74,999
- 6 = \$75,000-99,999
- 7 = \$100,000-124,999
- 8 = \$125,000-149,999
- 9 = \$150,000 or more

APPENDIX G. PARTICIPANT COMMUNICATION**Calendly Scheduling System**

Powered by: Calendly.com

URL: www.calendly.com/sastudy

ACCOUNT SETTINGS

Name: Emily McKnight

Welcome Message:

Welcome to the scheduling page for the Sexual Abstinence, Relationships, and Marriage Research Study. Please follow the instructions to add an event to the researcher's calendar.

Options #1: Individual Interview (1-hr)

This is your individual meeting without your spouse. Estimated time 30 - 45 minutes.

Options #2: Couple Interview (1-hr)

This is your couple meeting that includes your spouse estimated for 1 hour.

Participant Email: Interview Reminder

Subject: RE: Research Study – our interview date is coming soon!

Hello [participants]:

I just wanted to send you a gentle reminder that our interview date(s) is vastly approaching, and I am very excited to learn more about our experience and to gather how you and your spouse can contribute towards learning more about African American couples who abstained from sex before marriage.

Your interview(s) is scheduled for: _____

If you have not done so already, please complete the necessary preliminary steps below:

- 1) Provide your informed consent
- 2) Complete your demographic questionnaire.

In total, this process takes about 10 – 15 minutes to complete and can be done all in one place by clicking here [è Electronic Informed Consent + Demographic Questionnaire](#).

Also, I want to remind you that the interview will be virtual using the Zoom application which requires high speed mobile or regular internet service. The interview should be conducted in a private location free from distractions and to prevent from other family members or the public from overhearing.

Should you have any questions in the interim, please do not hesitate to reply to this email or give me a call or text directly at (XXX) XXX-XXXX.

Otherwise, I will see you (virtually) on _____.

Sincerely,

Emily McKnight

Participant Email: Thank You + Compensation Confirmation

Subject: RE: Research Study...just a few more steps.

Hello [participant],

Thank you for participating in the Sexual Abstinence, Relationships and Marriage Research Study! It was a pleasure learning from you and hearing about your story.

Your compensation for participation has been sent. Just a few more steps to go:

Step one: Please check your email for confirmation that your e-gift card was delivered.

Step two: For our records, we need your written statement that you received your participant compensation. A simple reply to this email will suffice as a written statement. Please reply to this message acknowledging receipt of your compensation as soon as possible..

What's next with the study? Well, I plan to analyze your interviews into a case profile, which is a recap of your interview(s) and experiences that you've shared. I will contact you again, if I have questions about the information you shared and wish to clarify your opinions or reflections.

Again, thank you so much for participating. I am certain that your input will provide valuable insight into this understudied phenomenon and contribute to what's known about Black marriage.

Take care,

Emily McKnight

Participant Email: Member Check

Subject: RE: Research Study – your profile is complete!

Hello [participants]:

I have a few follow-up questions for you about your interview. Can you clarify x, y, and z?

I can't thank you enough for your participation and I look forward to sharing the final results with you.

Hope to hear from you soon,

Emily McKnight

APPENDIX H. INTERVIEW GUIDE

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS		
<i>Before we begin, do you have any questions about the study protocol or the documents that were signed (i.e., informed consent)?</i>		
Specific RQ, Theory, or “Exploratory”	Interview Questions	Probes and Script
Potential subjective perspective	1. How did you hear about the study? 2. What do you know about me as the researcher? 3. What motivated you to participate?	Understand that this study is about learning from YOU and your experience, and that I value YOUR perspective. I’ll be happy to address any questions about my own personal experience with SA <u>after</u> the interview.
Build Rapport/ Gather Relationship History	4. Tell me about yourself. 5. Tell me how you met and decided to marry.	How long dated? How long engaged? Lived together before marriage?
RQ-1A: What were the motivating factors in the participant’s decision to abstain from sex until marriage?	6. What motivated you to decide (or agree) to abstain from sex until marriage?	Had you practiced this before? Was it your decision or your spouse’s? Anyone other than yourself, or current spouse influenced your decision? Were your family and friends aware of this choice? Supportive? Unsupportive?
RQ-1B: What constitutes SA in terms of sexual history and permissible sexual behaviors?	<i>There are a lot of various definitions for sexual abstinence.</i> 7. How did you define sexual abstinence at the time?	What sexual behaviors were allowed? What sexual behaviors were disallowed?
RQ-1C: What were the perceived costs and benefits of participants who abstained from sex until marriage?	8. What did you expect to happen once you decided on SA until marriage? 9. What were the costs of this decision? 10. What were the benefits of this decision?	When you decided, did you have certain pros and cons in mind? How did the actual experience of making this decision differ from your initial expectations? What limitations or challenges did you experience?
Exploratory	11. What <i>really</i> happened once you decided, as in, how did SA impact your life?	Explore different domains (e.g., psychologically, emotionally, financially).
<i>Later we will talk further about your experience with SA until marriage including your spouse, all three of us. Before doing so, is there anything you’d like to share before we get together with X, or anything you’d like to keep confidential about this interview?</i>		

DYADIC INTERVIEWS

Thank you for sharing your love story and your individual experiences with waiting for sex until marriage . Now that we are all together, I'd like to ask questions to the both of you, specifically about your courtship and now marriage

Specific RQ, Theory, or "Exploratory"	Interview Questions	Probes and Script
Exploratory	12. As a dating couple, what impact did SA have on your relationship?	Did the quality of your relationship change, if so, how so? Were their things that you had to do differently?
Theory: Sliding versus Deciding /Relationship Sequence	13. Did SA have any impact on other decisions you made during your courtship?	Probe for other areas of abstinence <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Combining finances? • Living together? • Meeting family members and friends?
Theory: Sliding versus Deciding /Relationship Sequence	14. How did that decision to abstain impact your decision to marry?	Did SA influence your decision?
Exploratory	15. What factors contributed to the success of abstaining until marriage?	What support did you have? What changes did you make to make sure you abstained until that day? Any changes once you got engaged?
Theory: Sliding versus Deciding /Relationship Sequence	16. What affect has SA had on your marriage?	Marital quality, satisfaction, sex life?
Exploratory	17. Do you think your decision to abstain impacts anyone <i>outside</i> of your marriage?	Children Family, friends, community, church?
Exploratory	18. If you could do it all over again, would you do anything differently?	Would you decide the same? At the same time?
Exploratory	19. What advice would you give to any person or young couple considering or currently abstaining from sex until marriage?	If someone or a couple came up to you, who was very similar to you (SA history), what would share about your experience.